



November 10, 2015

Dear Friends,

It's been a busy couple of months for us here in Broome, we hope you enjoy this latest update on Kimberley events and art developments...

Philippa & Geraldine



*Image Credits: (L to R) Alan Griffiths with his wife, Peggy, his daughter Dora and his grandson.
Alan standing next to his Balmoora & being presented his award by The Hon. John Day MLA, Minister
for Culture and the Arts at AGWA for the 2015 State Living Treasures Award © Waringarri Aboriginal
Arts 2015*

Alan Griffiths, WA State Living Treasure

On October 16th Waringarri artist Alan Griffiths was, along with other senior visual artists, musicians and authors, honoured as a State Living Treasure for his lifetime contribution to arts and culture.

“The 15 exceptional recipients of this year’s awards have made a defining and long-term contribution to Western Australia’s culture, history and arts,” Culture and the

Arts minister John Day said; “With careers spanning 40 to 60 years, our Living Treasures have become leaders in their respective fields, providing enjoyment and entertainment to communities throughout the world. Their journeys have also influenced and developed other artists, providing guidance and encouragement through teaching or as a role model.”

This last point is particularly applicable in Alan Griffiths’ case; for the past 40 years he has been dedicated to teaching his community traditional knowledge, dance, song cycles, language, painting and artefact-making. He is a respected cultural leader throughout the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. Dance performances under Griffiths’ ownership including the Bali Bali Balga (conveyed to him by the spirit of a deceased friend in 1974) and several Joonba (‘open’ performances sometimes referred to as corroboree); complex interpretations of events, country and culture. His performances are regularly presented throughout the Kimberley and at key events as part of the Darwin Festival. Born in 1933 into the Ngarinyman/Ngaliwurru language groups at Victoria River Downs Station in the Northern Territory, Griffiths grew up on cattle station stock camps. He began doing manual work at a young age, however with a non-Indigenous father and Indigenous mother he was destined to be taken from his station home and placed in a children’s institution elsewhere. When the authorities came to remove him his maternal grandfather stole him away to a nearby bush camp, where he spent several years learning how to live on the land and acquiring knowledge about his cultural heritage. He cites his grandfather as being his primary inspiration and influence.

Griffiths was too old to be taken to a mission by the time he re-emerged from the bush and instead returned to Victoria Downs station, where he worked as a stockman until 1957. He continued to work in the pastoral industry across northern Australia before becoming head stockman on two iconic properties near Katherine. During this period of his life he often travelled across country during the wet season, exchanging song and dance with other groups along the *Wunan* trade network which extends across the Kimberley and beyond. He eventually moved to Argyle Downs station south of Kununurra around 1965 and married his ‘promise’ wife, Peggy. After the 1968 Pastoral Industries Equal Pay Legislation, when many Aboriginal people were forced from stations, he sought work on a cotton farm in Kununurra.

Following his retirement in 1981 Griffiths began devoting more time to making didgeridoos and carving boab nuts. His growing interest in art-making coincided with the establishment of Waringarri Art Centre in Kununurra (with which he has been associated ever since) and by mid-1980 had progressed to painting with ochre and pigment on canvas, drawing on memory of his traditional country as well as depictions of secular performance and stories of station life and cattle mustering. These are the themes which have become the mainstay of his art practice.

Griffith's paintings of country employ the typically cartographic style of the east Kimberley; a planar perspective using dot-outlined block colour to depict important features of country. Given his personal history, it is not surprising that these works often combine post-settlement impositions on the landscape (station tracks, for example) with important cultural landmarks; a visual representation of the integration of two life-ways moulded by Aboriginal stock workers. There are occasional shifts in perspective and mood when he inserts figurative elements such stockmen and camels, shown laterally and often in playful pose.

More recently Griffiths has become well-known for his figurative work, particularly rhythmic renderings of dancers performing his own Bali Bali Balga, the Moonga Moonga women's dance and other Joonba. These works are covered with small jostling male and female figures which undulate across a picture plane punctuated by pulsing flashes of colour representing clothing and sculptural dance emblems known as Balmoora. Griffiths is renowned in the Kimberley for making these sculptural objects; wooden frames of varying dimensions, including cross-pieces around which striking symbolic designs are woven using lengths of brightly-coloured wool. Sometimes 2-3 metres long, they are carried behind male dancers or positioned in the dance ground during performance to great theatrical effect, particularly at night.

Griffith's work is held in significant national and international public and private collections. His paintings, prints, carvings and cultural artefacts have been included in more than forty group and solo exhibitions since the early 1990s. He has been shown at the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards on multiple occasions and in 2007 won the East Kimberley Aboriginal Achievement Award for his contribution to art and culture. In 2006, he received a Creative Development Fellowship from the WA Department of Culture and Arts, allowing him to produce a major body of work for the Darwin Festival. This included a residency at Edith Cowan University, as well as at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory where he furthered his printmaking skills.

In his ninth decade Griffiths continues to create, perform, and teach. He and his wife continue to work with Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Centre and often collaborate on paintings and cultural works. *"The most important thing for me is passing my knowledge on to my sons, daughters and grandchildren the things I learnt when I was growing up...Painting my country and keeping my culture strong is what is important."* They have five children, twenty-seven grandchildren and many great-grandchildren.

This is the third Living Treasures Awards following their introduction in 1998 and again in 2004. They have previously recognised Indigenous Western Australian artists Rover Thomas, Jimmy Chi, Paul Sampi, Queenie McKenzie and Janangoo Butcher Cherele. A book commemorating the recipients' cultural contributions to the state was

presented at the formal awards ceremony held at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where two of Alan's Balmoora were exhibited for the occasion.

For artwork images and more information about Alan Griffiths click [here](#).

DRS acknowledges the generous contributions of Chloe Papas and Waringarri Art Centre for this piece.

Philippa Jahn 2015



Image credit: (L to R) Philippa Jahn & Johnathan Johnson standing in front of his painting 'My Country, Purnmululu (Bungle Bungles)' at Yarliyi Art Centre Gallery & Janet Dreamer painting in the Yarliyil Studio

© Edwina Circuit & Yarliyil Art Centre 2015

Yarliyil visit: Janet Dreamer & Johnathan Johnson

Our last field trip allowed us a prolonged visit to Halls Creek and therefore, of course, to Yarliyil Art Centre, now settled into its new building on a prominent site right in the centre of town. Manager Jeannette Swan was away having a well-earned break and in her place consultant Edwina Circuit was conducting artist workshops for a history painting project. Having written elsewhere on Yarliyil, here we will focus on two emerging artists we had the pleasure of meeting during this visit – Janet Dreamer and Johnathan Johnson.

Janet Dreamer

"My country stays in my dreams, I dream about my home and I don't forget about my country."

On our previous visit to Yarliyil we'd noticed two acrylic works in a style so distinctive

we knew we had to meet the artist; luckily for us she was painting at the art centre studio this trip.

Janet was born at Old Flora Station in 1959 in the heart of Jaru country to the east of Halls Creek. She and her four brothers and younger sister grew up on the station and as kids they loved going hunting and fishing with the old people. Despite having to fit in with the routine of a pastoral property they were still able to acquire a deep understanding of their country and the mores of traditional life. Janet learnt station work alongside her mother and grandmother, traveling to stock camps and working in homestead kitchens. Her eyes light up when she recalls going away for ceremony during 'holiday time'; the summer wet season when pastoral work stops. In adulthood Janet lived and worked on other nearby stations including Billiluna and Kirrkimbie, where she married her Jaru husband and two of her children were born. When Aboriginal involvement in the Kimberley pastoral industry was brought to a rapid and traumatic end, partly as a result of the legislated introduction of equal pay for Indigenous workers, Janet and her family formed part of the mass enforced exodus off country to east Kimberley towns – in their case to Kununurra.

Janet first picked up a brush when she was around 16 years old after watching her father paint. Later on she painted in Kununurra, using the ochre pigments generally used by artists there. She says her ochre work was in a different style, which she also likes. As a result of an accident she is less mobile than she once was, and started painting again in Halls Creek for something to do. She credits getting her ideas from the time she was in the bush, and thinks about that time while she's painting. She says her subject matter includes stories, country and culture that she learnt from her old people. Janet's biography follows a life trajectory common to many east Kimberley artists, but her work is diverging quite markedly from the now familiar east Kimberley contemporary art styles developed over the last three decades.

We watched as Janet took a painting from blank canvas to finished work over the course of a day. Her acrylics are wildly exuberant, in pattern, brush-stroke and use of colour. At an art centre which already shows considerable stylistic divergence amongst its painters, Janet stands alone. No neat borders framing her subjects, no adherence to classical motifs or restricted palette; her paintings progress according to a highly individual internalised logic and the results are unsettling and mesmerising in equal measure.

This day as she worked, Janet was thinking about Donkey Crossing, a place on old Flora Valley Station with which she is deeply familiar. She explained that you can see a lot of kangaroos here, as well as kurukuru (magpies) and kutkali (brolga). They are depicted on her canvas, along with the numerous other bush foods which make this place special – kulibi (bush banana), bush apple, bubugara (witchetty grub), junda (bush onion), yawu (fish, bony bream), and jibulutj (wild duck). Initially they are

illustrated as an underpainting, at which point they are easy to see in their joyful asymmetry, if not identify. Slowly Janet overlays patterns, dots and slashes to bring them to life. *'Making them come out, stand out'*, as she describes this process, is an aesthetic impulse common to many remote artists who utilise a variety of techniques to achieve it, of which dotting is but one. In certain contexts this intention to make things 'brilliant' also has a spiritual significance or purpose, contributing the power of immanence to painted objects and bodies.

As she completed the painting Janet started to talk about how the people who died at Donkey Crossing call out for the birds. She agrees that her paintings are an amalgam of Dreaming stories and personal experience. It is difficult for a viewer to see the difference without a clear explanation from Janet, who might not want, or be authorised, to give one. What might at first glance look like a complex depiction of flora and fauna might symbolically represent a Dreaming story, or be an oblique way to tell of less palatable historical events. Similarly another artist at the table, Maggie Long, was working on a more restrained piece. Over the course of an afternoon she shifted from pointing out the trees and rocks and watercourses she had painted, to finally describing an early contact-era massacre which had taken place there.

Perhaps the historical painting focus of Edwina's workshops had impacted on participants in unexpected ways, and they were recalling historical events for places they commonly painted. Or perhaps this layering of meaning has always been present, just not generally articulated. Women's artwork in the Halls Creek area has often focused on figurative depictions of plants and animals, but it can't always be dismissed as simply 'bush tucker' painting. The more complex of these paintings are likely to be grounded in a gender-specific cultural authority and symbolism enabling a layered reading of their significance. It is entirely plausible that post-contact historical events have at times also been 'pictured' in these works.

For more on Janet Dreamer click [here](#).

Johnathan Johnson

When we first arrived in the art centre gallery we were struck by a large new work hanging in the gallery space. It was clearly reflective of the style of the Kija artists at Warmun rather than the colourful, more desert-influenced work of many artists at Yarliyil. Whilst executed in ochre and pigment, it also successfully incorporated lines of clear blue acrylic. Mixing the two media in this way is not easy and we were intrigued to know more about the painter of this work. To our amazement we discovered that this was just the third canvas produced by a young man new to the art centre. Due to his work commitments Johnathan paints at home rather than the art centre but as luck would have it he wandered in while we were there, giving us the chance to meet.

Jonathan Jangala Johnson was born in Derby in 1989. When not busy working in Halls Creek he returns to the Kija community of Wurreranginy (Frog Hollow) some 130 kms to the north, where many of his extended family live permanently. A number of members of this family are respected painters who are seminal to the contemporary art story of the east Kimberley – Jack Britten (d.), George (d.), Patrick and Beryline Mung Mung and Freddy Timms, all of whose art careers have at some point been associated with Warmun Art. Jack Britten and Sam Butters, Jonathan's grandfather, were instrumental in establishing the Frog Hollow community in 1981, following a period living in Wyndham after being forced off east Kimberley cattle stations after the Equal Pay legislation of 1968.

The community is clearly important to Johnathan. This where he grew up, and was given a bi-lingual education at the little local school. He enjoys the benefits of a full-time job but, aware of the trappings of life in town, is equally drawn to contemporary bush life. He spoke with real pride of the political and artistic achievements of his older relatives and holds a serious attitude to his own developing interest in painting. The work we looked at had been painted in town during some rare spare time, but he was keen to get back to Frog Hollow and his other family outstation at Kawurra close to Purnululu (the Bungle Bungles) to fish, look for ochre and paint with family.

"As a kid I used to sit down with all the old people at Frog Hollow. They would make paintings by mixing ochres and special gum from a tree. I am now looking at their paintings to get inspiration for my own work. I'm looking at Jack Britten's work; he had very good painting techniques. I'm learning from his paintings. I'm living at Halls Creek at the moment. It was hard to find work at Frog Hollow. But I am still looking at my country; my country is in my head. It's all in my head."

We were standing in front of the 120 x 90cm canvas which first took our eye as we spoke. Every component of *My Country Purnululu (Bungle Bungle Range)* was explained in detail; this was not a beginner's generic landscape by any means. Each landform was identified by their Kija and Kartiya (whitefella) name, and many by their cultural significance as well. He explained how the pale yellow ochre delineates his family's country, which includes Purnululu and reaches east to the Ord River and north to Osmond Creek. There are many living waters (permanent freshwater springs) in this country, as well as important rock-holes. Evidently aware of our interest he also identified places with associations to other important Kija painters such as Rammey Ramsey and Rusty Peters.

He described how he had used ochre from home for the painting and how he is learning by trial and error how to prepare this for; the exacting techniques of grinding, sifting, and mixing with the correct quantities of binder and water for the desired effect. He prefers natural ochre to the processed earth pigments often used for convenience. In his first works the painted surface is highly textured with ochre grit. Some painters

prefer this effect but Johnathan would rather a smoother surface and intends to grind his ochre to a finer powder in future. We were intrigued by his inclusion of blue acrylic for the rivers and creeks. There have been recent experiments elsewhere with this combination, with varying degrees of success. Here its restrained use and subtle ability to lift the more subdued ochre tones has worked well.

It's encouraging to see the growing participation of men at Yarliyil, particularly younger ones such as Johnathan. The core group of older women who have been central to the establishment of the art centre are keen to see this happen; for the art centre to be seen as inclusive in a community which is, like many others, attempting to overcome a degree of social and generational division.

Johnathon struck us as a young painter whose serious approach to his artwork is both intellectual and aesthetic. His family have yet to see his latest work, but we're sure they would be impressed and proud.



Image credit: Painting at Menkawum Ngurra © Edwina Circuitt & Yarliyil Art Centre 2015

Therapeutic Art at Menkawum Ngurra

On our recent field trip to the east Kimberley we were waylaid in Halls Creek for an extra few days thanks to a raging bushfire preventing our departure for Balgo. We managed to entirely ignore the fact that we were spending the AFL Grand Final weekend in a town of fervent football fanatics, and spent our time focusing on gentler, yet no less exciting pursuits.

One of these was spending Saturday morning at the Frail Aged care home, Menkawum Ngurra, painting up a storm with some of the residents. We accompanied Edwina Circuitt, who had been trying to keep this additional activity going over the 6 weeks she'd been at the Halls Creek art centre conducting artist workshops. Edwina was the manager at Warakurna Art Centre in the Gibson Desert for seven years, something of an epic stint in such isolated circumstances. During this time she was instrumental in establishing an innovative and highly successful art program at Kungkarangkalpa Aged Care facility in the tiny community of Wanarn some 100 km away.

The people who participated in this program were senior Ngaanyatjarra men and women of great cultural authority, holders of knowledge of country accumulated over generations now confined to the sedentary existence of a 15-bed care home. The weekly painting program measurably improved the quality of their later lives in many ways. They weren't the only ones to benefit however, as the later life 'wobbly' [\[i\]](#) paintings of Nora Holland Walytjaka, Myra Cook (dec.), Carol Maanyatja Golding, Tjapartji Kanytjuri Bates (dec.), Tjungka Lewis (dec.) and Neville Niypula Mearthur amongst others came to fascinate lovers of Aboriginal art nationally. (For an absorbing account of Wanarn artists we recommend Brooks and Jorgensen's recent publication *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: old age travels in the Tjukurrpa*) [\[ii\]](#)

Motivated by a close understanding of the health and social benefits of this painting program, as well as the joys of its unexpected results, Edwina hoped to initiate something similar in Halls Creek in the short time she was there. We began the morning loading the DRS vehicle with a pop-up studio's worth of acrylic paints, brushes and small black plywood boards. Our arrival was greeted by smiles from staff who clearly didn't view our intrusion as a nuisance. Some of the residents were too frail or unsettled to participate, but others were keen for a chat if not a paintbrush. The home has been designed for the climate and the sensibilities of residents, who are more likely to feel comfortable in a communal setting rather than isolated in a bedroom. All rooms front a verandah, which encircles a covered open-air space surrounded by gardens and tall trees. Even those who are bedridden are wheeled out to be included in the social atmosphere of this area.

Residents at the home require a spectrum of care. Some are experiencing various stages of dementia or are in a state of total physical dependence, but others have lower physical care needs and retain full mental capacity. Four women already seated at tables were given paints and a board, at which point the morning became somewhat unpredictable and totally engrossing. One was a woman who previously painted with Warmun art centre and was enjoying the opportunity to be able to paint again. She was working on a large acrylic canvas begun the previous week, in a style quite unlike her previous work. Perhaps this was because acrylic was a new medium for her, opening new stylistic and thematic possibilities different to those inherent to the use of ochre pigment dominant at Warmun. Whilst happy to explain the painting to us, she was otherwise content to be left to work alone.

We spent much time sitting between two women at another table. One is a well-known painter from Balgo who was given a large partly-finished canvas. This had been particularly finely worked the week before, in her signature loosely dotted style, and we were looking forward to seeing it completed. She was provided with the appropriate pots of colour and our attention was diverted to the woman on our left, who clearly needed a little more assistance. Things started to get messy and a little hilarious. We

had been warned she wasn't averse to tasting the paint and sure enough as soon as her brush was loaded it went towards the mouth rather than the little black board. She was easily dissuaded out of this though; after Edwina mimed a dotting motion over the board with her hand she began to place considered fat daubs of blue in a line. Two more parallel lines and another motif soon followed. Aside from moments of distraction over spills and other messiness, for the rest of the session she carefully overpainted the same pattern with different colours. She appeared to be accessing some deep memory - of body painting activity from her early life perhaps, or Tjukurrpa story; her actions weren't at all random. When we lifted the board for her to see she repeated the rhythmic dotting action and gave the strong impression of reliving or retelling a story by way of explication – whether for her own or our benefit was hard to say.

Meanwhile the Balgo artist had been painting steadily and although she hadn't covered any more blank canvas she had made great progress reworking the delicate marks of the previous week, this time with a little less finesse. We winced a little to see something so beautiful disappear before our eyes, but had to remind ourselves that the intended outcome of this activity was something else altogether. As Acker and Carty have described in reference to the program at Wanarn, it is run on an 'art therapy model... and seeks to provide artists and, equally, those who have never painted before, with a social, cultural and creative outlet'. [\[iii\]](#) This piece might well be over-painted multiple times and in the process, from a western perspective repeatedly live and die as an aesthetically resolved work. It will be no less a product of, and stimulant to, internalised cultural processes, however in this context removed from the expectations of an external art world. Perhaps this artist is in the process of a stylistic shift, from an earlier style to a more distilled later life one, something Jorgensen has identified in the later work of several elderly Aboriginal painters elsewhere [\[iv\]](#).

Marked health benefits have long been recognised to accrue to individuals from various forms of art therapy. In a remote Indigenous context some additional observations can be made as to how this might work. Firstly, the elderly are regarded as being the holders of deep esoteric knowledge and occupy senior ranks in terms of social standing. It is not a coincidence that this cultural authority and knowledge has also been the foundation and template for the most powerful art produced by Indigenous groups and individuals over many years. Painting later in life during physical decline is a powerful means of staying connected to a fountain-head of spiritual sustenance. For those experiencing mental decline painting possibly functions as a key to accessing parts of an otherwise failing memory, much in the way music can similarly function. Secondly, the Indigenous concept of health places enormous emphasis on social well-being. Gathering to paint promotes happiness. Art-making constitutes a process for cultural transmission and connects younger and older generations. It is a culturally familiar context in which to bring the two together and alleviate social isolation amongst the elderly, as occurs at Wanarn, where Aged Care staff have reported reduced need for

medication amongst art program participants.

Being present for such painting activity enables a response to the resulting artworks animated by personal connection and awareness of a universal human vulnerability. There is a growing collection of little black boards stacked against a wall in the Yarliyl art centre studio. The jewel-like tones and minimalist calligraphic marks they bear point to a profound contemplation of the human condition within an Indigenous ontology.

Philippa Jahn 2015

[i] Jorgensen, D., 2012, 'Aboriginality, Hyper-visibility and wobbliness in paintings from Australia's Western Desert', *World Art*, 1:2, 259-272

[ii] Brooks, D. and Jorgensen, D., 2015, *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: old age travels in the Tjukurrpa*, UWA Publishing, Perth

[iii] Acker, T., and Carty, J. (eds.), 2012, *Ngaanyatjarra: art of the lands*, UWA Publishing, Perth, p. 201

[iv] Jorgensen, D., 2012, 'Aboriginality, Hyper-visibility and wobbliness in paintings from Australia's Western Desert', *World Art*, 1:2, 269-70.



Image credit: Mowanjum staff member Maitland Ngerdu working on Storylines. © Mowanjum Art & Culture Centre 2014

Art Centres and Digital Archiving

One of the discussions which took place at the ANKAAA Kimberley regional meeting this year focused on the subject of digital archiving for art centres. This is a timely topic for ANKAAA to be addressing, as many in remote communities run the risk of being left behind in the realm of digital knowledge platforms and the multiple opportunities they offer. The discussion was lively, particularly as participants began to learn more

about the potential and risks of various aspects of digital archiving. ANKAAA is well positioned to advocate for and support the aspirations of northern remote art centres in this regard and we're sure that staff left the meeting equipped with adequate feedback to design their planned Digital and Other Archiving Strategy.

This is an issue which Desert River Sea has also been encountering during art centre visits. Two in particular are illustrative of the benefits and difficulties associated with establishing digital archives. One north Kimberley community has been extensively recorded (via photography, film and audio) since its establishment last century and had a great deal of cultural material removed from it; very little remains for community members to freely access. This situation is worsened by the fact that most residents have no home internet and a few computers for shared use were only made available at a community resource centre two years ago. Computer literacy is low and there is minimal awareness of the existence of historical material held elsewhere, let alone the possibility of accessing it online. Much of the world now takes this for granted; it is hard to conceive that some remote centres in Australia have their disadvantage multiplied by being mired in the technological past. Every year this situation continues the impact on a community's potential for self-empowerment in the realms of education, health, economic and cultural sustainability is reduced. Two simple examples we encountered illustrate this: local women in the community mentioned above are attempting to teach young girls traditional dance, but due to the frailty of the few remaining singers they must rely on a single old tape for their accompaniment. They are desperately trying to seek another copy before it breaks, but their isolation stacks the odds against them. They would also like to start a cultural centre alongside their small art centre as, amongst other things, a centre of community pride and identity but have little hope of achieving this without the most basic infrastructure. A digital archive in community would immeasurably increase opportunities to reconnect with their own past.

By contrast the better-resourced Mowanjum Art Centre in the West Kimberley has recently established a digital archive in their media centre. This was achieved with the assistance of the WA State Library as part of their Storylines Project, an 'online archive for the State Library's digitised heritage collections relating to Aboriginal history in Western Australia'.^[i] Mowanjum is equipped with dedicated computers and local staff who have been trained by the library to maintain, extend and control (when authorised by senior men and women) this evolving archive of information. The value of this resource to the art centre and the community can be gauged by the enthusiasm with which local people use it to broaden their art and cultural activities, readily accessing and contributing to their own oral histories, film, music and material culture.

For the 89% of the Australian population clustered in urban areas the value, if not absolute contemporary necessity of digital archiving is self-evident. In remote regions such as the Kimberley opportunities to facilitate archiving lag compared to the rest of

the country however, with little awareness of the implications of this situation and how it might be impacting on communities. Of the many positive reasons for digital archiving for remote Indigenous groups, some are quite distinct to those for the mainstream population. They fall into two categories – archiving of historic material *digitally returned*, and storage of material already in communities but in outdated, damaged or unmanageable hard copy formats. The benefits could be outlined as:

Digital archiving of returned material

The digital return of material not otherwise available for repatriation. This includes historic photographic and film records of people, places, cultural practices and cultural materials. At best an archived digital collection can form the nucleus of a remote community or art centre cultural keeping place including contemporary and historic objects.

Digital return of material to communities from far-flung collections and institutions is much less contentious and time-consuming than the repatriation of actual objects. It need not impede such repatriation processes and can at least be an interim measure. Digital return is increasing seen as an example of best practice by collecting institutions who understand the need to engage practically and meaningfully with the original custodians of their Indigenous holdings. In some cases digital return is mutually agreed upon as the best way to enable community access to historical material whilst keeping the actual material safely stored.

Control of information can be returned to communities along with a digitised collection and, following appropriate protocols for ensuring intellectual, property and moral rights, information can be shared between institutions and communities to mutual benefit.

Control of information extends to the ability of a community to maintain its own access protocols related to gender and seniority.

Indigenous community identity and cohesion can be reinforced when its own history is as readily available to itself as it is for others.

Digital archives enable the strengthening and reinvigoration of culture for communities which have had much historical information and material removed post-settlement, and where the irreplaceable oldest generation is rapidly diminishing.

Digital archives are a rich resource for contemporary art practitioners wanting to reconnect with historic objects, in the absence of the pieces themselves.

A community digital archive can contribute to the revival and retention of local languages

Digital archives offer teaching / learning opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission.

Digital archiving of art and culture records already held

Many art centres have early records on paper and as recordings on outdated media such as tape or film. These are at serious risk of damage or destruction by adverse environmental conditions, unsuitable storage and over-use. Making digital copies and archives of these records ensures their security and longevity.

Appropriately archived digital resources restore equality of access by community members as information no longer needs to be locked away. Recordings at risk of over-use (early music tapes for example) can be copied into more robust formats suitable for contemporary hardware and ease of use.

A digital archive of community or art centre collections can be an important component of a community cultural keeping place including contemporary and historic objects.

Digitally archiving early art centre / community records also safeguards them as an important historical record with national relevance.

This appears to amount to a watertight case for the establishment of digital archives in remote communities / art centres. There are nevertheless issues to address:

The costs of establishing and maintaining an archive. With partnerships (such as the Storylines initiative) these need not be prohibitive, however they remain an impediment for smaller art centres and communities already struggling financially. For those centres needing to digitise their own extensive records there is also a substantial labour component involved in scanning and uploading. The rapid pace of technological change also necessitates format updates to keep data accessible.

Urgency to digitise – before the old formats become irretrievably damaged, and before meta- information is lost with the passing of older generations.

Amount of material not yet digitised by collecting institutions and not readily available to share.

Training requirement. Computer literacy and archive training, as well as education for art centre staff on the burgeoning development of external public archives and how to search for, access and request material for their own use.

Risk of further marginalisation of communities not sufficiently resourced to either acquire or house a digital collection.

The possibility that digital repatriation of historic material will be perceived by some institutions as an opportunity to defer difficult discussions regarding the ethical imperative for repatriation of actual objects in many cases.

It is evident there are great social and cultural benefits to the establishment of digital archives in remote art centres and communities which should not be eclipsed by the difficulties in doing so. Their value can be readily gauged by the success of those already developed. *Ara Irititja* [\[ii\]](#) developed for the Anangu people of central Australia was an early ground-breaking initiative which has substantially paved the way for

others to follow, either by example or by the re-purposing of their software (as with Storylines).

An additional consideration is the relative importance of intangible and tangible cultural heritage in an Indigenous context. The west has always held its tangible heritage high esteem; it commoditises and collects to the extent that it requires objects to house its objects. In contrast, Australian Indigenous cultures place great emphasis on intangible heritage; their oral traditions, performance, ritual and other expressions of esoteric knowledge, social and environmental law. How can this be 'housed', safeguarded from loss or exploitation in an era of globalisation?

These issues have been recognised for some time. The UNESCO Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 outlines:

The importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development...

The deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage...

That communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity...

At Article 13 a number of measures adopted for consideration are listed, amongst others to:

(c) foster scientific, technical and artistic studies, as well as research methodologies, with a view to effective safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular the intangible cultural heritage in danger;

(d) adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures aimed at:

(i) fostering the creation or strengthening of institutions for training in the management of the intangible cultural heritage and the transmission of such heritage through forums and spaces intended for the performance or expression thereof;

(ii) ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such

heritage. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>

Digital archives can be repositories for contemporary as well as historic material, they are evolving platforms. The Mowanjum community bases StoryLines at its art centre which is, like other Kimberley art centres, working hard to involve younger people and has been exploring the potential of digital art forms. Mary Lou Divilli, for example, recently produced evocative black and white portraits of her young son, photographed

against a black background with traditional hand stencils projected on to his body. Visiting artist Craig Walsh introduced the international *Inside Out Project* to Mowanjum [iii] which resulted in the *My Face Our Place* 'drive-thru' gallery installation in Derby, as well as large-scale digital projections on community landmarks (pictured above). Mowanjum's historical archive both informs and is enriched by this experimental work using photography and video. Their Storyline continues into the future.

Relative to the enormous sums allocated to the shifting feast of other short-term remote community programs marked by dubious outcomes, minimal sustainability and zero community ownership, cultural archives at the very least offer tangible socio-cultural return for modest outlay. An argument can easily be mounted that a digital archive be considered an essential resource for every major remote community or art centre and supported accordingly. Mainstream communities expect no less after all, and are considerably better placed to ensure this happens.

'This documentation I am doing is for generations to come, I feel very proud of what I am doing for my people. In time our mamarnjarl (countrymen) will benefit from the work I have done to document the storylines of our people'. (Sherika Nulgit, Barnjamedia Trainee Digital Collections Officer [iv])

With thanks to Mowanjum Art Centre for the photographs accompanying this essay.

Philippa Jahn 2015

[i] http://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/for/indigenous_australians/storylines. Accessed 19.10.2015

[ii] <http://www.irititja.com/> Accessed 19.10.2015

[iii] <http://www.insideoutproject.net/en/best-of> Accessed 20.10.2015

[iv] <http://www.mowanjumarts.com/keeping-place/community-collection/> Accessed 15.10.2015



Image credit: (L to R) Sign to Ngurra Arts Centre, painted canvas bags by Francine Steele & Exterior view of Ngurra Arts Centre © AGWA 2015

News From Ngurra

Ngurra Arts is located in the little community of Ngumpan, just off the Great Northern Highway some 90 kilometres east of Fitzroy Crossing. It occupies a purposed-built new building, literally raised from the ashes of the previous art centre premises which burnt down in tragic circumstances in 2010.

It is currently run by Ngumpan locals Lillie Spinks, Francine Steele and Corinthian Crowe with some off-site assistance from Karen Dayman (instrumental in the success of Mangkaja Art Centre) and the local Kurungal Council. Ngurra principally services artists from the Ngumpan, Wangkatjungka, Gilly Sharpe, Ngaranjartu, Kupartiya and Bawoorrooga communities, although these also have ongoing links with Mangkaja Arts, the larger established art centre in Fitzroy Crossing. Unfortunately the centre's basic operational funding is to cease in 2016, so the local council is also attempting to seek ways of keeping the centre functioning and the arts workers employed.

It hasn't been possible to put the finishing touches to the new building – there are no fans or air-conditioning for example, or adequate hanging systems for artwork display, but effort is clearly being made to have some interesting material exhibited and to experiment with work other than painting on canvas. Lillie Spinks was instrumental in the production of a small book on local trees for example, and Francine has been repurposing acrylic paintings by transforming them into unique small bags of various designs. We had thought this was perhaps a lateral way of using damaged canvas – why else would you do the unthinkable and cut up a painting? However in a lovely example of the divergent attitudes to 'art' and 'art-making' between remote Indigenous and Western cultures, Francine described how she watched her father (Jimmy Pike's brother Edgar) complete a painting, then asked if she could cut it up to make a bag and he gave it to her without question.

The bush around the community provides ample material for various experimentations with traditional and contemporary crafting skills. Local women have been colouring silk using local botanical dyes, and collecting seeds and grasses for bead-making and basketry. They have also just finished a workshop with textile artist Megan Kirwin Ward, who introduced techniques for using discarded materials to make soft sculptural

dolls and animals. The results are full of character; we look forward to seeing further development of these skills as the women give full rein to their creative impulses and stamp a local identity on these pieces.

The majority of the work on display at Ngurra is still painted canvas however; a selection of work from younger emerging artists such as Francine and Lillie, as well as the glowing pieces by senior painters such as George Tuckerbox, Kuji Rosie Goodjie, Edgar Pike, Hazel Hobbs, Butcher Wise, Nora Tjookootaja, Jean Tighe, Gordon Tighe, Amy Palmer and Mayarn Julia Lawford.

Most of the artists are from the Walmajarri and Wangkatjunga language groups, many of whom moved out of the desert country to the south in the 1950s. Their artwork is imbued with a desert sensibility; the colour palette the warm tones of the dry country, the subject matter its waterholes, sand hills and vegetation. They are joyous and light-filled. These painters are also enthusiastic collaborators, coming together in groups on occasion to produce larger works which meld individual styles into works of cultural authority and great visual appeal.

Lillie and Francine are skilled at managing visitors, their enquiries and purchases; they have been instrumental in keeping both the previous art centre and the new premises open despite setbacks and uncertain funding arrangements. The centre offers economic opportunities to a number of communities however, especially given its proximity to the Great Northern Highway and, more importantly, the potential to function as an important cultural hub. We hope that the support is found to help the centre thrive in this respect, not simply as a money-making opportunity.



Image Credit: Amanda Smith in the Marnin Studio stall at the 2015 Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair © Marnin Studio 2015

Marnin Studio; an Inspired Story

Our last field trip enabled a return visit to the Marnin Studio in Fitzroy Crossing. *Marnin* is the Walmajarri word for women and this unique design studio has emerged from the innovative work of the Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) in the heart of the Kimberley in Western Australia.

Located on Bunuba Country, MWRC works with women and families from the Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Wangkatjunga, Walmajarri and Nyikina language groups to provide vital human services such as legal support,

world class child care, high profile advocacy and shelter from violence. In 2013 MWRC seeded an ambitious Social Enterprise Program, supporting women to turn the things they love to do into projects that make money. This program evolved into the Marnin Studio, driven by the vision of local women artisans.

Marnin Studio continues to grow through strategic partnerships and by connecting women locally, nationally and internationally through the creation of exquisite block and screen-printed textile products and hand painted boab nuts. Products from the Marnin Studio are contemporary in design but based in the women's deep knowledge of the local environment, culture and community. A Designer and Artist in Residency Program has furthered the artistic integrity of the program through working with the studio participants to create products that are deeply studied and designed as a collection of works.

The studio itself is small and picturesque, jammed with an array of paints, fabrics, artworks and samples. It hides behind banana plants in the lush commercial garden maintained out the back of MWRC. To one side is the outdoor dyeing area, where recycled oil drums hold silk soaking in mysterious botanical concoctions, in front a verandah where women can work in the cool shade of vines and palms. It was a hive of activity when we visited, as the women worked to a deadline finishing an order for 300 painted boab nuts for The Ark Clothing Company in Melbourne. Coordinator Brooke Small explained that a seasonal colour palette had been developed for these nuts, in conversation with The Ark designers, who have also been instrumental in forging a broader partnership with Marnin as part of their business ethos which values social and ecological responsibility.

Seasonal colour palettes are also developed for the textile products printed in the workshop. The women go bush and take photos of plants; their leaves, seeds and flowers. These images are compiled into a collage from which the artists draw inspiration for a limited range of compatible hues which they then use when screen printing on linen,

silk, cotton and paper. These colours are also matched with the botanical dyes which the women use for lengths of silk sewn into scarves and wraps. Sometimes these lengths are over- printed with delicate hand-carved blocks featuring local plant and animal designs, also seasonally selected. The results are exquisitely subtle.

The quality of the finished products reflects this disciplined rationale behind the studio's artistic practice. Hand in hand with the commercial partnerships forged with city organisations is the importance accorded Fitzroy Valley cultural life which imbues each finished piece. Economic reality bites however. As with most other arts organisations in the Kimberley the necessary operational funding support is uncertain, despite the long-term record and national recognition of umbrella organisation MWRC as a successful driver of programs for social health improvement. One highly competent arts worker has lost her job and the coordinator position is also insecure.

In order to attract further investment Marnin Studio is developing a sustainable business model that seeks to balance the development of a unique collection of handmade works at the studio with a small range of textile products produced offsite through selective collaborative commercial partnerships. Marnin Studio is also licensing custom made designs for commercial use by others including The Ark Clothing Company who will retail three beautiful silk scarves throughout their four Melbourne stores from this November and Endota Spa who will feature Marnin designs on the inside packaging of their 2016 natural beauty products range.

It can be seen that as a social enterprise program, Marnin Studio operates a little differently to an incorporated art centre as such. The rationale for its existence prioritises activities linked to economic development and, thereby, social health. Business opportunities must be actively sought and built upon for program sustainability. Of equal importance however is the specific cultural context which informs the studio's art projects. Marnin demonstrates a particular vitality in its ability to integrate these two elements; maintaining the integrity of culture alongside

commercial viability.

“Marninwarntikura exists today on the shoulders of remarkable women from the Fitzroy Valley...It is because of their past actions that the Women’s Resource Centre occupies its central position, delivering vital human services across this remarkable region” (June Oscar AO)

For more information on Marnin Studio
visit: www.mwrc.com.au

*Part of this article courtesy of Brooke Small and
Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women’s Resource Centre.*



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