

GAGOSIAN



DESERT PAINTERS OF AUSTRALIA PART II

**With Works from the Collection of Steve Martin
and Anne Stringfield**

Opening reception: Friday, July 26, 6–8pm

July 26–September 6, 2019

456 North Camden Drive, Beverly Hills

Emily Kame Ngwarreye, *Merne Akngerre*, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 47 × 119 inches (119.4 × 302.3 cm) © Emily Kame Ngwarreye/Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2019

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Through their surface resemblance to Western abstraction, [the paintings] effect a thrilling reversal of the rules of our museums and markets, and map a new kind of cosmopolitanism that spans ages and continents.

—Jason Farago, *New York Times*

Gagosian is pleased to present a sequel to the critically acclaimed *Desert Painters of Australia*, again drawing from the distinguished collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield. This is the first time that the work of Indigenous Australian artists will be shown in Los Angeles since *Icons of the Desert* at UCLA's Fowler Museum in 2009.

Evolving out of ancestral rituals of mark making practiced for many thousands of years, such as tree carving, body painting, and sand drawing, painting on canvas is a fairly recent phenomenon for remotely based Indigenous Australians, linked to the forced displacement in the late 1960s of communities such as the Pintupi, Luritja, Warlpiri, and Arrernte peoples to the Papunya settlement

in the Northern Territory. This social upheaval inadvertently created a resilient hub of artistic production: out of communal work on canvas, wall, and ground emerged the movement now referred to as Western Desert painting.

Expanding upon the New York exhibition, *Part II* occupies both ground-floor galleries, with paintings by three generations of leading artists. These compelling paintings that embody ancestral power offer everything from dynamic geometric patterns to topological imagery, channeling diverse conceptions of land, human life, and the passing of time. They enact the retelling of “country,” a process that allows for art to forcefully affect the space and world that its makers occupy. While their predecessors made use of traditional symbols and ideograms, the Papunya Tula artists worked to sublimate overt references in order to protect sacred designs. For the most part, male and female artists developed divergent stylistic approaches: men were entrusted with perpetuating traditional patterns and forms rich in optical geometries—as in the charged rectilinear compositions of George Tjungurrayi and Warlimpirnga Tjapaltjarri—while women were free to pursue more expressionistic interpretations of common narratives, as in Yukultji Napangati’s *Yunula* (2009), a deeply rhythmic painting whose compressed tonal strokes evoke a shimmering terrain west of the Kiwirrkura community.

Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri’s series *Rockholes and Country near the Olgas* (2007) uses dots and contoured lines to chart a vivid topography of the rocks and hills around the mythic Olgas in Central Australia. Collapsing scale and perspective, his formidable landscapes weather age and time alike. Three separate but related paintings reveal an exploratory palette, from aqueous blues and greens to hot yellows and ochers. Willy Tjungurrayi’s *Untitled* (2001) exemplifies a different dotting technique in which a hailstorm is rendered as a myriad of tiny pale spots, pulsating with energy to suggest the effects of weather on a parched landscape. These works, along with other geographically specific subjects by Naata Nungurrayi and Makinti Napanangka, demonstrate multivalent approaches to depicting sacred or historical sites, whereby the real world is mapped alongside the conceptual, liminal realms of dreams and memory.

As an Anmatyerre elder from the Central Desert area and one of the renowned Desert Painters, both in Australia and abroad, Emily Kngwarreye focused on women’s activities, from batik making and the harvesting of seasonal crops. Starting to paint in her late seventies, she moved quickly through a startling range of inventive styles, from the free-flowing, delicately pixelated color fields of *Wild Yam and Emu Food* (1990) to the wild and urgent brushstrokes of *Kame Yam Awelye* (1996) and the boldly graphic, sinuous lines of *Alhakere* (1996).

Despite its apparent affinities with many formal and conceptual Modernist tendencies, Indigenous Australian painting has remained relatively isolated, stemming instead from the rich corpus of stories, memories, laws, and customs of its creators. Universally affective, its mesmerizing visual language resists outwardly didactic interpretation: the more one looks, the more one senses the cultural inscriptions contained there that change meaning and context as they circulate, and their intrinsic value in the intercultural flows that span hemispheres.

Artist Biographies

Emily Kame Kngwarreye (1910–1996), an elder of the Anmatyerre tribe and arguably the most famous Indigenous Australian artist—she has been the subject of several major museum surveys—began painting at a late age in the Alyawarra community of Utopia. She is celebrated for her rapid and systematic exploration of different styles and formal inventions identified with women’s ritual activities. Her early dot paintings drew on her experience with traditional batik fabric printing; over time, her paintings became more and more gestural, reduced in their detail and liberated in their formal qualities.

Yinarupa Nangala (born 1948) is a Pintupi woman who was born west of what is Kiwirrkura community today, toward Jigalong. The daughter of one of the great Papunya Tula artists, Anatjari Tjampitjinpa, Nangala began painting in 1996, depicting the country around Mukula and the women’s ceremony associated with it, using the story passed down to her from her mother’s father.

Like many of the Desert painters, **Makinti Napanangka** (1930–2011) didn't start to paint until she was well past middle age, in the mid-1990s. She had a deep interest in women's rituals, which in her community were focused on the pair of ancestral women known as *Kungka Kutjarra*. According to folklore, these women created the rocks at Lupulnga and their activities are reenacted in a women's-only ritual typically involving dancing with woven strands of string spun of human hair (often cut in mourning). The bold and flowing lines of vibrant color in Napanangka's paintings visually replicate the power and movement of these hair strings.

Yukultji Napangati (born 1970), a close relative of Warlimpirnga Tjapaltjarri's, was one of the group who left its traditional hunting-and-gathering life as recently as 1984. As much an active forager in the environment as a painter, Napangati seems to have begun painting at Kiwirrkura in 1996, at first with the other women who began painting there and then with her husband at the time, Charlie Ward Tjakamarra. Drawing on ancestral myths that were passed down to her by her mother and grandmother (their "Dreamings"), Napangati has developed a style involving a very distinct stroke, layered in different colors to produce an oscillating visual effect on large grounds.

After the death of her first husband in the early '60s, **Naata Nungurrayi** (born 1932) made her way to Papunya at the time when the last remaining Pintupi who were living an independent life were migrating out of the desert to settlements. Nungurrayi, like many of the women artists, began her life as a painter in the mid-1990s, when the older generation of men had mostly passed away. Into topographical compositions, she introduced new dotting techniques and imagery, such as the ancestral rock pythons of Karilywarranya, in the Pollock Hills in Western Australia, where she grew up.

Ronnie Tjampitjinpa (born 1943) came into his own as an artist in the late 1980s as part of a "second wave" of Desert painters with a focus on striking linear forms and strobe-like figure/ground effects. Rather than emphasizing an iconography directly expressing the activities of ancestral figures in the landscape, or relying on color, iconic features, and their arrangements as the principal aesthetic devices, Tjampitjinpa's more recent works are endowed with powerful optical effects that suggest the revelation of ancestral body decorations by flickering firelight.

Named after his beard or whiskers, **Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri** (c. 1920–2008) was a Pitjantjatjarra man living in the small community near Mount Liebig in the Northern Territory. He was a renowned *ngankari*, or healer, and came to painting later in his life. His paintings relate directly to drawings that men of his age once made for anthropological interlocutors with crayons on butcher paper. Whiskey's spectacular and unusually large paintings depict his country around the area of Mount Olga and Ayers Rock (Uluru).

Warlimpirnga Tjapaltjarri (born c. 1958) is a member of the "Pintupi Nine," or the "first contact group," one of the last Indigenous peoples to move into contact with Australian society, in 1984. He started painting in acrylics in 1987, after observing his relatives painting in the remote community of Kiwirrkura, in Western Australia, where the art cooperative known as Papunya Tula had become well established. A large number of Tjapaltjarri's earliest paintings were purchased and donated to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and he has exhibited in such major exhibitions as documenta 13 (2012), in Kassel, Germany.

Tjumbo Tjapanangka (1926–2007) was closely related to most of the Pintupi painters whose works are on display, although he lived hundreds of miles to the south of Papunya in the Western Australian community of Balgo. Though inspired by the work at Papunya, the Balgo painters used brighter pigments and bolder colors in their often more roughly executed compositions. Tjapanangka's paintings use the rectilinear designs associated with men's ritual activities and employ subtle tonalities to express the effect of light on the salt lake Wilkinkarra.

George Tjungurrayi (born c. 1947), of the Pintupi people, has had numerous solo exhibitions in Australia and was included in the Sydney Biennale (2018), where a suite of his paintings was exhibited both flat on the ground and on the wall. Invested in the ritual heritage he learned as a young man, particularly in the stories of the Tingarri cycle related to various places in his country, he evolved an intricate way of working where sacred syntax is sublimated into intense linear

configurations. Tjungurrayi has been recognized as the originator of a style of reductive yet dazzling linear composition, painted in single lines (not dots) laid down with careful precision.

One of the last artists of the first generation, **Willy Tjungurrayi** (1932–2018) lived in various settled Pintupi communities and was deeply embedded in their ritual knowledge. Instead of the careful, exacting marks common among some of the younger painters, Tjungurrayi used looser, more expressive marks, rendered in fine detail, to describe the weather conditions and related ancestral stories of sites such as Kaakurutintjinya (Lake MacDonald).

#DesertPainters

Press

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