Talking About Abstraction

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Curated by Felicity Fenner

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

Surface Tension

On Australia Day 1984 James Mollison, Director of the Australian National Gallery, helped usher in a seismic shift in Australian visual culture by declaring the work of the Papunya Tula painters to be "possibly the finest abstract art achievements to date in Australia"[1]. He made this announcement in front of a huge 1982 canvas by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula. It was the Gallery's first major acquisition of Western Desert painting - whose significance as contemporary art Mollison had hitherto denied. The endorsement of the National Gallery was more important to the still struggling enterprise than its implied reduction to the status of "abstract art". Mollison's conflation of the abstract forms of representation in Western Desert painting with the western project of creating non-representational art passed unchallenged.

It has been the strategy of Western Desert art all along to evolve a visual language grounded in traditional culture yet attuned to western aesthetic sensibilities. The varieties of expressive minimalism pioneered over the decades following Mollison's declaration by Emily Kngwarreye, Turkey Tolson, Rover Thomas, Ronnie Tjampitjimpa and their followers have enjoyed unprecedented success. *Talking About Abstraction* explores the still largely one-way conversation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art by bringing together leading exponents of these popular forms of contemporary Indigenous painting with non-Indigenous abstract painters "selected on the basis of the clearly articulated influence on their practice of Indigenous art, specifically of the work by the Aboriginal artists represented in the exhibition". Emphasising the artistic influence of the Indigenous artists' work, rather than its abstract "affinities" with non-Indigenous work, avoids the trap William Rubin famously fell into in his controversial *Primitivism* exhibition of 1984. Rubin was accused of presenting the Indigenous works in his exhibition not as artistic sources of European modernism but as curios created by anonymous African artisans, mysteriously resonant with the modern masters.

No such subterfuge is employed in *Talking About Abstraction*. How could it be in the world of contemporary Australian art? The Indigenous artists in this exhibition are bigger 'names' than the non-Indigenous artists who cite them as primary influences. The curatorial premise suggests that it is no longer a question of analysing Indigenous art's relationship to the mainstream, but the other way around. I will go further, and say what Indigenous voices have been saying for some time now: Indigenous art is the mainstream of Australian contemporary art. Not only in the eyes of overseas audiences for whom Indigenous artists have the only distinctively Australian voices, but for the Australian art world itself. What is at stake for non-Indigenous artists nowadays is how to get some kind of foothold in this new reality.

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[1] Sydney Morning Herald Jan 26th 1984 p2

Thinking Beyond Abstraction

"My paintings share a formal similarity with my colleagues in the desert"[1]

The current generation of young to mid-career non-Indigenous abstract painters in Australia have been inspired and influenced by Aboriginal painting more than any other. This is the basic tenet of *Talking About Abstraction*. It is borne out not only by the visual relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous works in the exhibition, but by interviews and informal conversations with artists over a number of years. An earlier generation of western-trained artists came to Aboriginal art retrospectively, having completed art school and defined their own area of practice before Australia's Indigenous culture began to achieve the prominence it has enjoyed over the last two decades. For those entering art school since the early 1980s, however, Aboriginal art has been a formative influence, integral to their study and visual experience. For many non-Indigenous artists of this generation, Aboriginal painting is also central to their own collections of contemporary art and indeed, some of the Aboriginal paintings for this exhibition are from the collections of participating non-Indigenous artists.

Two sub-themes emerge from the exhibition. One is that the new, innovative rather than traditional forms of Aboriginal imagery have, not surprisingly in art historical terms, been particularly influential. Second, the influence is not restricted to the work of non-Indigenous artists. The late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, as the first Aboriginal woman artist to achieve international renown and Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, as one of the leaders of Papunya Tula's dynamic and influential visual culture, are included here for their early influence over recent abstract painting both within and beyond their own traditional (including narrative and gender-specific) contexts.

As Aboriginal art became more available for exhibition, its impact on young artists, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, inevitably became more profound. The Aboriginal artists included and the geographic regions reflected in this exhibition are determined by the perceived degree of innovation and influence. Represented are the desert communities of Utopia, Haasts Bluff and Kintore, the eastern Kimberley Ranges in the north-west and Peppimenarti in the north. The non-Indigenous artists in this exhibition have been selected on the basis of the clearly articulated influence on their practice of Indigenous art, specifically of the work by the Aboriginal artists represented in the exhibition. They are all based in the eastern metropolitan centres of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

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Much talk about cross-cultural dialogue has accompanied the mainstream acceptance of Aboriginal art, but is it a one-way conversation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting? Western artists have always been very open to influence from works seen, particularly by geographically isolated Australian artists, in art history books and international art magazines. *Talking About Abstraction* reveals that Aboriginal art has provided Australian non-Indigenous abstract painters with alternative possibilities

in abstraction, especially in terms of process, line and colour. Twentieth century abstract models - from Constructivism to Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism – remain central to western-trained artists, though are inevitably viewed from one remove, through the self-conscious veil of Postmodernism. Arriving on the heels of the rumoured death of painting, the ascendancy and impact of Aboriginal art was particularly timely. It threw a lifeline to young Australian painters seeking to re-invest the medium with the meaning and significance once championed by the early modernists.[2]

Conversely, Aboriginal artists in this exhibition have had variously small degrees of exposure to contemporary Australian and international art, certainly not enough to constitute a "dialogue" with non-Indigenous art. Opportunities exist, but western art has to date been of less interest to Aboriginal artists than vice-versa. Often the (western) art advisors at Aboriginal art centres act as tutors as much as advisors, introducing images of art from elsewhere. When Emily Kame Kngwarreye visited the National Gallery of Australia she was particularly taken not only with Aboriginal painting from other parts of Australia, but with the abstracted landscapes of Fred Williams, which she understood as being by a "whitefella painting his country". Maxie Tjampitjinpa felt a similar affinity with paintings by David Aspden's work, while Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's interest in alternative techniques was aroused by a survey exhibition of Degas' pastels that he saw in New York. [3]

One fundamental difference between cultural absorption by black and white artists, however, is that while western artists tend to paint for personal, intellectual fulfilment, the process of painting for Aboriginal artists is more socio-politically oriented. It is a method of keeping alive traditional cultures otherwise threatened by assimilation. In other words, just as Indigenous work does not divulge details of (sacred) content to a general audience, neither is that content readily open to introduced influences. While innovative forms of artistic expression flourish, the core of Aboriginal painting, unlike non-Indigenous work, is fixed in the specificity of its historic cultural roots.[4]

In order to protect the market's demand for "authenticity", outside artistic influences on Aboriginal art are often downplayed or even denied. In *Talking About Abstraction*, Paddy Bedford's debt to Rover Thomas is reflected in his painting and series of gouaches, but does he ever look at images of western art? Is there a debt to Miro, for example, in the brightly coloured lines, or Motherwell, in the singular rounded forms of his recent gouache paintings? While it might be patronising to expect Bedford to be flattered by the impact his work has on non-Indigenous abstract painters (he's apparently not), it is far more arrogant to expect him and other Aboriginal painters living in remote areas to remain immune to western culture.

Talking About Abstraction is not the first exhibition to consider formal parallels in the work of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous abstract painters, though some recent surveys of abstract painting in Australia have avoided confronting the difficult issues by omitting Aboriginal art altogether.[5] Generally, though, it is now established curatorial practice to exhibit traditional Aboriginal art in the context of contemporary Australian and even international art. Not only has Aboriginal art escaped the ethnographic ghetto, it now provides a benchmark against which contemporary painting is judged.[6] One of the earliest exhibitions was Victoria Lynn's *Abstraction* 1990, which included some of the artists here.[7] Though too early then to suggest an influence of Aboriginal art on non-Indigenous painting, the exhibition purported a shared idiosyncratic approach to abstraction by artists from different cultures. In acknowledgement of the project's potentially problematic premise, Lynn took "heed [of] Arthur C. Danto's warning that likeness hung with likeness takes no account of context".[8]

Commercial galleries have sought to broaden the appetite of the market by placing Aboriginal art in the context of western abstraction. In 1996 Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, presented a group show of paintings from Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists with a stated objective "to throw open the conversation between a number of leading abstract painters".[9] Though a visually compelling show, it was less of a "conversation" than a series of formal coincidences. The same year Sherman Galleries, Sydney, went a step further and dispensed with the foil of western art, presenting an exhibition of Aboriginal painting under the rubric of "abstract". While the exhibition successfully balanced curatorial innovation with commercial intent, it was noted at the time that "The most pertinent issue to arise… from the exhibition as a rhetorical exercise is that of cultural assimilation… To speak of abstraction is to refer to modernism, which is peripheral to the reading of Aboriginal art and ultimately only useful as a point of comparison".[10]

It is now accepted that the successful international reception of Aboriginal art is largely contingent on a resemblance to certain genres of western abstraction. Ironically, it is also accepted that Aboriginal art's link to Modernism is a convenient invention of western critics and the marketplace. Indeed, the presence of "abstraction" in most Aboriginal painting is arguable, given that imagery is typically based on elements of the land, traditional ritual or beliefs. W.J.T. Mitchell recently alluded to the inherent subjectivity of our reading of Aboriginal art, which is informed by either the Greenbergian definition of abstraction as non-objective, or by a broader concept of abstraction being based on phenomenological motifs in the representational world.[11] While the non-Indigenous artists in *Talking About Abstraction* consider their work abstract in concept and form, the exhibition does not make a similar claim for the abstract status of Aboriginal art, only the point that work by the Aboriginal artists here is remarkable for its self-assured departure from traditional figurative modes of rendering narrative content.

Locating Aboriginal painting within the western art arena remains fraught and politically sensitive, though it is an area of curatorial and critical practice inevitable to those working in the field of contemporary art in Australia today. Anthropologist Eric Michaels alluded to the reasons for a problematic discourse as early as 1988, just as Aboriginal art was gaining status on the international art market: "Considering Aboriginal art practices as problems in contemporary discourse – problems of production, circulation, and exchange – may indicate that something about world economies and ideology is also centrally involved here".[12]

Though artists, critics and collectors are generally drawn to Aboriginal art through an existing love of western abstraction, "the strangeness of buying other people's religious images and putting them onto the wall" demands consideration.[13] In a current political climate that prohibits public apology for the ill-treatment of Aborigines, the enthusiasm for Aboriginal art is uncomfortably tied to issues of reconciliation. It would be naïve to presume, however, that Aboriginal artists are any less aware than their western counterparts of market motivation and are not able to respond with works that fulfil demand while protecting Aboriginal heritage. Philanthropy and politics often go together and Aboriginal art has been a powerful political tool in drawing attention, nationally and internationally, to Indigenous issues, particularly that of land rights.

The intersection between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous culture is not a black and white one: it's a complex grey zone of debates about tradition, change and ownership, guilt and appropriation. This complexity is an inherent part of projects that bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous art and, as Okwui Enwezor has warned recently, it is crucial that we do not allow political correctness to inhibit and curtail such debates.[14]

Eric Michaels argued in relation to Yuendumu and Papunya that "these works are to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them – practices that promote authority, not authenticity".[15] Bernice Murphy cited these problems when she controversially included Aboriginal work in the inaugural Perspecta exhibition of contemporary Australian art in 1981: "Aboriginal ground paintings in acrylic on canvas have been long excluded from the art museum context in Australia as a result of quite artificial strictures placed around the question of cultural authenticity".[16] Though it's a perceived "authenticity" that attracts some investment-collectors, it is the sense of *authority* that attracts non-Indigenous artists to Aboriginal painting. While it is commonly accepted that the work of non-Indigenous painters is likely to be enhanced rather than compromised by its contact with Aboriginal art, the reverse is not true.

Curators risk undermining in exhibitions such as this one the role of cultural heritage in both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting. *Talking About Abstraction* acknowledges that risk, embracing the fact that the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous paintings here have emerged from very diverse cultural backgrounds and that their intersection occurs at a painterly rather than broader cultural level. In creating a forum that does not simply reveal formal parallels, but makes a case for the influence of one on the other (the "other" in this case being the western-trained artists), the exhibition highlights rather than obfuscates the fact of their difference.

It is only thirty years since Aboriginal art's "difference" emerged both as a barrier and inducement to the mainstream art world. The Australian public was introduced to Papunya Tula paintings in the 1970s and though the work was a huge revelation to western audiences, early methodologies of interpretation were akin to learning a foreign language. Papunya coordinator Geoffrey Bardon used a diagram to explain the paintings' narrative and symbolism to non-Indigenous audiences. As a result of such attempts to decipher, it became common practice for paintings in gallery and museum exhibitions to be accompanied by explanatory texts. Art Gallery of NSW curator Ken Watson made the point that his 2003 exhibition *True Stories: Art of the East Kimberley* was criticised for its lack of explanatory wall texts.[17] As Watson's strategy implied, curatorial practice has shifted in recent years to reflect an acceptance of Aboriginal art by a mainstream art audience either more knowledgeable about Indigenous culture or more comfortable reading the paintings on a purely formal level (or, more commonly, a bit of both).

Internationally, the trend of presenting Indigenous cultural practices in a visual art context has accompanied a more general re-definition of the role of curators as creative agents in the commissioning, production and presentation of contemporary art. The first exhibition to hang Picasso next to an African mask was *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* held at the Museum of Modern of Art, New York, in 1984. Though the Indigenous work was still seen as ethnographic, curator William Rubin was at least successful in demonstrating the significant influence of tribal culture on modern art. Other exhibitions in 1980s New York brought Aboriginal and Maori art to the fore of the contemporary art world's centre.[18] Particularly adventurous in setting up a dialogue between Indigenous and western art, the 1985 *Tributaries* exhibition in South Africa, curated by Ricky Burnett, presented the work of white artists alongside that of black African practitioners who had never before exhibited in a gallery or museum context.

As David McNeill has noted in relation to the visual arts, 1989 marked the beginning of a massive globalisation of the art world, prompted by world events such as the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing.[19] While exhibitions such as those mentioned above lay the ground for change, the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris was the major turning point in curatorial responses to the art of Indigenous cultures. Curator Jean Hubert Martin set up deliberate juxtapositions between work by well-known contemporary visual artists from the world's art centres and traditional practices from Indigenous cultures. The exhibition was widely acclaimed, though the Indigenous work, while recognised as powerful within its cultural specificity, was out of context at the modern Pompidou Centre and was therefore still largely perceived as peripheral to international contemporary practice.

1989 was also the year that the women artists from Utopia, having been introduced to canvas and acrylic paint just months before, held an exhibition at the National Trust's S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney. *A Summer Project* presented the first eighty-one paintings to emerge from artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Ada Bird Petyarre. This was the first of many exhibitions of Aboriginal art in the early 1990s that collectively had as powerful an impact on young Australian artists as the 1967 *Two Decades of American Painting* on the preceding generation.

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Sometimes it is the work of just one artist that opens the door to a new level of understanding or appreciation. In winning the

2003 Turner Prize, Grayson Perry challenged preconceptions, demonstrating that ceramic practice can have a vital role in the contemporary art arena. In form and content, Perry's pots articulate current views of the world in a visual language understood by mainstream contemporary as well as craft audiences. From 1989 and culminating in the posthumous 1998 retrospective exhibition at Queensland Art Gallery, **Emily Kame Kngwarreye**'s (c.1910-1996) paintings had an unprecedented effect on artists and audiences. Kngwarreye is central to *Talking About Abstraction* because in dispensing with familiar Aboriginal iconography and thereby taking Aboriginal painting to a new level of abstraction, her work, while arguably maintaining its culturally-specific intent, speaks the language of international contemporary art. For most non-Indigenous critics and collectors Kngwarreye's work was not seen as tied to an Aboriginal visual heritage, but as the requisite bridge between Indigenous and western painting. Nevertheless, her innovative approach has not only been hugely influential to non-Indigenous artists, but has inspired other Aboriginal artists to new and independent forms of expressing traditional culture.

Kngwarreye's painting is informed by traditional knowledge and experience, including ceremonial body painting. Based on Dreaming maps of her desert country, the early paintings are distinguished from those of her peers by a loose form of dotting, applied at great speed and often by hand. By 1990 the linear structure became less visible as the dotting evolved into a means of expression rather than obscuration, eventually the under-structure being totally subsumed by fields of flowing dots that shift in hue and density as the eye travels across the surface. From 1993 until her death, the artist produced a series of dramatically reductive linear paintings, returning to the body paint markings of her *awelye* yam Dreaming that formed the basis of her earliest paintings.

When **Debra Dawes** (born 1955) first came across the paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye she was struck by their "palpable energy and intensity".[20] At the time, Dawes was working on paintings that resembled large swathes of gingham fabric, investing the flat repetitious grid design with tonal movement across the canvas, creating an impression of flux and three dimensional space. Gingham, a quintessentially domestic, feminine fabric was synonymous to Dawes' rural Australian childhood in the northern New South Wales town of Moree, with its large Aboriginal population and deplorable race relations. Dawes' credits Moree with her understanding of the land's capacity to ingrain itself on one's consciousness as well as her attraction to Mondrian's work, finding a rapport in his spiritually inspired, abstract responses to the huge Dutch skies and expansive, flat plains.

The sense of place, especially her childhood place, remains inherent to Dawes' practice. She remembers the long line of the bitumen road through the landscape and the repetition of her encounter with it as she walked home every day from school. Dawes is still mapping that line through space and time in these current paintings, which are divided into vertical bars reflecting the number of days in the month. One panel is completed each day (more if she misses days), with colours chosen intuitively at the time of execution. The finished pattern of panels, each differing in colour and breadth is, like the work of many Aboriginal women painters, the vestiges of her "performance", a visual barometer of the rhythms of daily life. Dawes also appreciated the performative aspect of Kngwarreye's work, the perception of one's art practice as an extension of the artist and the rituals of traditional life. When she visited the major Papunya Tula exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2000, Dawes recognised also in those paintings the same sense of the body's role, of being in the moment, integral to the process of painting repetitive lines or dots, patterning that in its imperfections reflects the body's breath, shifting positions and the need to pause for a cup of tea.

For many Aboriginal women artists the ritual of painting – sitting together, talking and mark-making – is the point of their art practice. The resultant paintings are a means of maintaining economic security, thereby serving another purpose entirely. This ritualistic approach is widely referenced in feminist readings of contemporary art, the repetitive, almost obsessive process demanding the same patience and disciplined engagement as historically female crafts such as knitting and weaving. **Regina Wilson**'s (born 1948) paintings are based on linear patterning derived from traditional women's crafts such as these. Wilson is from Peppimenarti in the north of the Territory. She is a master weaver and learnt through her mother's practice also to paint an extensive variety of stitching and weaving designs.[21]

In being awarded the 2003 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Wilson's work was recognised, like that of Kngwarreye, George Tjungurrayi and Paddy Bedford, as pushing the parameters of her community's traditional modes of image-making to reflect an individual and innovative approach, in the manner of contemporary artists of other cultural backgrounds. The delicate, gently undulating and circular grids that form the basis of Wilson's compositions belong to a tradition in Aboriginal art that is particularly accessible to western artists in its visual link to Minimalism and the Modernist grid. It is also similar in style to cross-hatching motifs in bark paintings from the nearby northern region of Maningrida, etched into the western consciousness as quintessentially "tribal", having been removed for display in Paris in the 1870s, a whole century before the modern emergence of Aboriginal art.

While Dawes came to Kngwarreye's work relatively early in the elder artist's career (she remembers being initially struck by it 1991), for **Jemima Wyman** (born 1976), the youngest artist in the exhibition, it was Queensland Art Gallery's 1998 retrospective that inducted her. Like many Aboriginal painters, particularly the women painters, Wyman's background is in performance. And like Debra Dawes, a feminist interest in the performance of art-making, together with the way Kngwarreye's work challenged the stronghold that western male artists had on Abstract Expressionism, are central to her influence on each of them.

"I arrived at painting through an installation and performance based practice that investigates the interrelatedness of the body/artwork/space… my initial response to 'how to generate a painting?' was to become Jackson Pollock (I made drip paintings). I wanted to take him on, with all the inherent heroism and

patriarchy he represents. At the same time of having this interest in the broader concerns of international painting, locally there was a retrospective of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's work at the Queensland Art Gallery. This was work I could see first-hand and it impacted on me physically. A few things excited me about this exhibition: the scale of the works (consuming the body, the space and shifting between installation and painting); the mark (an index to the body, performative and continuous, challenging the autonomy of any one painting and making each relate to time, space and the history of the maker); the connectedness of body/artwork/space. Process is also important in my own practice, registered through videoed performance and by using the canvas as a receptacle for the gesture".[22]

Wyman's practice is closely linked to the culture of the everyday. Her concept of the everyday is, like that of Aboriginal practitioners, grounded in direct cultural experience. The installation/painting in *Talking About Abstraction* is called *Kimberley Blue* after the base colour used from a range of house paints. "I'm interested in the readymade nature of this process and chose this particular colour because of its name and implied link to the landscape - the colour could be associated with the Australian outback and Kimberley region".

As Dawes and Wyman reveal, non-Indigenous artists generally come to admire Aboriginal art through an existing rapport with European and American abstraction. **Angela Brennan** (born 1960) recognised in Kngwarreye's work the same energetic freedom of colour and line as she'd always admired in the work of 1960s and 70s abstract painters such as Morris Louis and Jasper Johns. In reviewing the Kngwarreye retrospective exhibition in 1999, Brennan, like Wyman was attracted not only to the formal and expressive qualities of the paintings themselves, but to the fact that Kngwarreye is a female artist challenging the traditionally male dominated arena of western abstract expressionism: "It's pointless to make stylistic comparisons to western artists... [though] interesting to muse on the fact that one stylistic language can be developed in two radically different cultures; the colours, shapes and brushmarks might be similar, but Kngwarreye's work originates from somewhere else – at least one galaxy away from western male stars".[23]

Brennan noted the paintings' "all-over" quality, adding that "Pictorially there is something very attractive about the lack of a centre. It has the effect of producing a reverberating infinity – the edges of the canvas are not there for Kngwarreye. You get the feeling of unboundedness; that the paintings go beyond the borders even if the paint doesn't".[24] The phrase "all-over" and reference to a decentralised composition are concepts borrowed from American art critic Clement Greenberg's description of Abstract Expressionism some fifty years earlier, revealing the basis of her interest in Kngwarreye's work as an existing rapport with western abstract painting.

Brennan was particularly taken with the bold palette and freely drawn lines in Kngwarreye's late paintings. The work of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Peggy Napangardi Jones have also influenced the artist's candid approach to line and colour.[25] In 1996 Brennan went to Alice Spirngs and Haasts Bluff to see first-hand the Aboriginal art that she'd come to know through her Melbourne gallery, Niagara. There she met Long Tom Tjapanangka, whose figurative paintings share formal qualities with Ginger Riley, and **Mitjili Naparrula** (born 1945), who has proved a key influence.

Naparrula is represented in *Talking About Abstraction* with a favourite painting of Angela Brennan's. A striking work characterised by a non-traditional palette of bright blue, yellow and red, the composition is divided into three sections of thick, parallel lines. The brazen use of colour and line finds an echo in Brennan's own conspicuous forms and loud tones.

Naparrula's work has also been influential in the Aboriginal art community, especially on female relatives in Kintore, who until ten years ago remained in the shadow of the male Papunya Tula artists. They travelled to Haasts Bluff in 1993 for the opening of the Ikuntji Women's Centre, where the work of Naparrula and other women artists greatly impressed and inspired the Kintore women to paint themselves. Artistic exchanges followed, culminating in a large exhibition of women's work at Tandanya, Adelaide, in 1995.

Like other non-Indigenous artists in *Talking About Abstraction*, **Melinda Harper** (born 1965) came to Aboriginal art via an interest in western abstract painting. While Bridget Riley is perhaps an obvious reference for Harper, she also cites (as do A.D.S. Donaldson and Ildiko Kovacs) George Tjungurrayi as an important influence on her brightly coloured, optically arresting linear compositions. Harper knew little of Aboriginal culture when she became interested in the painting of Emily Kame Kngwarreye and others over a decade ago. She appreciates in Kngwarreye's and Tjungurrayi's work that the artists are painting their country and its inherent stories, but her interest is in how the paintings are formally conceived and executed.[26] Harper remains entranced by the purple and black George Tjungurrayi painting in the National Gallery of Victoria, especially in the way that it is not possible to determine where it begins and ends, a quality also noted in Tjungurraryi's work by A.D.S. Donaldson.

Though she now uses masking tape to achieve the clean edged forms required for maximum optical effect, Harper's earlier works comprised more freely composed bands of colour that invoked the handmade quality of tribal weaving. Her palette remains uncompromisingly bold but the feeling of movement now appears across the whole surface of the painting. While the debt to Modernism is clear, the artist's interest in Aboriginal painting – especially, as the large work here demonstrates, in the undulating surfaces of Emily Kame Kngawarreye as well as Tjungurrayi – assumes a profound presence in Harper's recent work.

In addition to Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the other key artist from an earlier period in *Talking About Abstraction* is **Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula** (c.1940-2001), whose dotted line paintings representing the straightening of spears have, like Kngwarreye's work in Utopia, informed the work of other Papunya Tula artists, in addition to exerting considerable influence on non-Indigenous abstract painters. In the paintings here by Tolson, **Dr George**

Tjapaltjarri (born c.1930) and **George Tjungurrayi** (born 1947), it is possible to trace an evolution from definitive dotting in Tolson's work, to flowing, abstracted lines in the work of the younger artist (Tjungurrayi). The precise dotting of Tolson's horizontal lines is looser and less detailed in Tjapaltjarri's work, in which the dots become continuous, unbroken lines, and is completely absent in the freely drawn linear patterning of George Tjungurrayi.[27] These three artists collectively represent the trend towards abstraction in recent Papunya Tula painting. Though not specifically cited by the non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition, another worthy inclusion would have been the late Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri, whose linear Pintupi designs of Tingari cycles were some of the earliest to break with traditional forms in favour of abstracted motifs.

Like Dawes, **A.D.S. Donaldson**'s (born 1961) rapport with Aboriginal painting is informed by his childhood experience: an early boyhood in Darwin lay the ground for an ongoing interest in Aboriginal art. Like other artists in *Talking About Abstraction*, Donaldson is drawn to investigating the process of painting by his "colleagues in the desert" and the inherent performative practice, in particular, of George Tjapaltjarri and George Tjungarrayi, noting that their paintings are often undertaken with a single, repetitive action. He regards his work as linked by the fact that all embrace imperfection: in Donaldson's grids the spray paint flicks out accidentally; in Tjungarrayi's it is possible to see where the artist has stopped to re-load the paint onto the brush. (In Debra Dawes' work, similarly, the rhythm of her days over a period of time is reflected in the composition and density of the finished painting). In all, each of the lines is unique, borne of the moment in which it was created.

Donaldson is interested in the degree of reduction in Tjpaltjarri's and Tjunguarryi's work, and the fact that the paintings do not, unlike Tolson's, resemble any image at all, neither spears nor land, thus providing no obvious link to the representational world. This extreme reduction suggests to Donaldson that these paintings, like his, are as much about the act of painting itself as about narrative content. Donaldson has pointed out that these are not minimalist paintings but the opposite, even, in his own words, "anti-conceptual… They all start somewhere and look as if they don't know where they're going. They are not minimal in terms of surface or finish, but contain accidents and the uneven marks of process and time-passing".[28]

Some years ago Donaldson replied, in answer to a question about the future of Australian art, that "I look forward to a continually evolving dynamic between the work of contemporary abstract painters and that of Indigenous Australian artists".[29] Interestingly, he chose the word "dynamic" over "dialogue" or "discourse", because this is how he sees the relationship – as something exterior to (imposed) notions of shared cultural intent, based primarily on the formal and technical aspects of abstract painting.

As a senior law man, **Paddy Bedford Jawalyi** (born c.1922) has been involved in painting as part of ceremony all his life. Like the male Papunya Tula painters in the exhibition, Bedford breaks with traditional visual lexicons while maintaining a lineage to the ancient and recent cultures of his country. In typical Kimberley painting, historic events and the features of the landscape are reduced to the barest, essential markings. This process of reduction reaches another level of abstraction in Bedford's extraordinarily focussed and economic use of line and colour. His work combines important family Dreamings such as emu, turkey and cockatoo with roads and rivers in his traditional country that he continues to visit. As in Emily Kame Kngwarreye's reductive aesthetic, the paintings invoke an emotional feeling towards, or resonance of the artist's particular place and narrative.

Bedford's innovation lies in the creation of new methodologies to map ancient knowledge and biographical anecdote. The eloquent visual shorthand for which he is now famous has been described as abstract in concept as well as form. By forging fresh visual languages that find parallels in western art, Bedford's art is meaningful and accessible not only to an Aboriginal, but much broader international art audience. The recent gouaches "blink between Kimberley tropes and Modernist idioms" in a series of work "remarkable both for its beauty and for the claim that it is abstract, [that] the marks are not representational".[30] The latter claim, in the context of Aboriginal art's relationship to western abstraction, represents either strategic marketing devised to seduce collectors of abstract art, or a significant transgression of the boundaries traditionally separating Aboriginal and western painting.

For **Ildiko Kovacs** (born 1962), it was the pared down work of British educated Australian painter Tony Tuckson, itself greatly influenced by Indigenous art, that offered, as for many Australian abstract painters, a road into Aboriginal painting and alternative approach to understanding the Australian landscape. Kovacs' interest in Aboriginal art stems from her early interest not only in Tuckson, but in the work of Ian Fairweather, American Abstract Expressionism and, in an aesthetically small but culturally giant leap, Rover Thomas. Fresh approaches to line is crucial to Kovacs' interest in these artists and also accounts for her admiration for the simplified linear compositions of George Tjapaltjarri and George Tjungurrayi.

In 1996 Kovacs went to Broome for ten months, visiting the Kimberleys to see first-hand the ancient Aboriginal rock art. She returned in 2003 and witnessed first-hand the working practice of a number of artists, most notably for her that of Paddy Bedford. At a time when she was trying to avoid becoming formulaic and seeking a new approach to painting, Bedford offered Kovacs a mode of practice based on intuition and facility. In response to observing Bedford, Kovacs made more than fifty works on paper over a very short period of time. The series heralded a transition for the artist towards the current paintings, which are noticeably more raw in their incorporation of accident and irregularities, though still share with the earlier work and that of the Aboriginal artists she admires a strength and simplicity of composition and colour.

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The thirteen artists in *Talking About Abstraction* are engaged in various approaches to painting that on a formal level share an overriding preoccupation with line. Because the exhibition's focus is on abstraction, there are no paintings here with overt visual reference to narrative or the landscape, so that mapping and figurative elements are omitted and even dot painting assumes a

modest presence. The focus is deliberately on forms of abstraction that more convincingly talk across cultural borders: metaphorical lines bridging different experiences of knowledge and place and the lines of everyday life and performance, weaving land, forms and colour with ideas and influences from other cultures.

An aspect of Aboriginal art important to a number of artists in the exhibition, though not thoroughly explored here, is the link between painting and performance. Dawes, Donaldson, Harper and Wyman all discuss this and the concept of painting not as something external to one's life, but as inextricably bound, an extension of the self. The Aboriginal artists here reflect this in their practice – Wilson in her coexistent weaving and painting activities, Tjungurrayi in the way that he divides his time, as a senior law man, between community, teaching and artistic roles.

Colour is another important linking factor between works here. There has been a dramatic shift in the palettes of Aboriginal painters over the last few years in the move from locally sourced, organic colours to more high-keyed, western tones. In the Kimberley Ranges, as one example, Rover Thomas retained a natural palette throughout his oeuvre, yet subsequent artists such as Freddy Timms and now Paddy Bedford revel in the possibilities offered by introduced colours. The new approach to colour is another facet of innovation explored in the exhibition. A.D.S. Donaldson is intrigued by the fact that most Aboriginal painting commences with a black field, or underpainting, while the non-Indigenous artists traditionally work on a white field. The mystery is not solved by the exhibition, though it provides a useful metaphor for the fact that fundamental difference underlies the paintings of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, which on the surface may look deceptively similar.

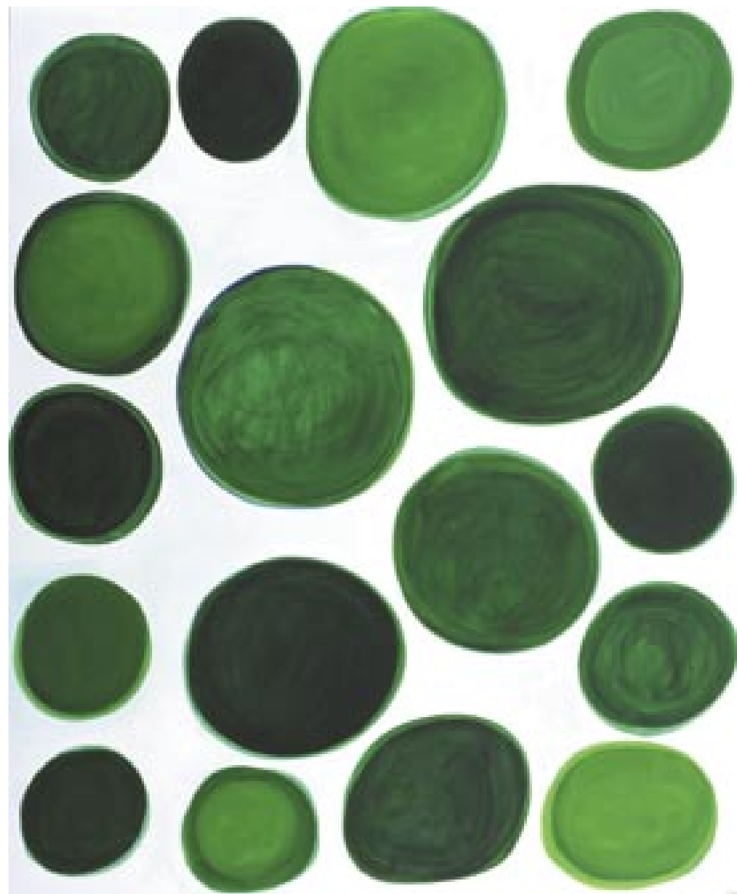
Many other artists could have been included in this exhibition (and will be next time). The work of Gloria Petyarre and Dorothy Napangardi, as just two examples, has inspired many non-Indigenous painters. Hilarie Mais relates to the spiritual dimension of Aboriginal abstract art in her own Minimalist practice, while Jon Plapp's recent paintings share with George Tjungurrayi's an understanding of the optical power of a series of black lines. Christopher Hodges, who has been looking at Aboriginal painting for longer than any of the others, is inevitably influenced in his own art practice. There are many other artists, both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal, whose work ought to be represented in this context and will be in the next exhibition.

Echoing Vivien Johnson's thoughts in the Foreword to *Talking About Abstraction*, A.D.S. Donaldson, when asked "What is the future of contemporary art in Australia?" responded definitively that "The future won't begin to happen in Australia until a whole level is wiped away in the management class, those occupying the powerful institutional positions, the gatekeepers – that whole Anglo imperative needs to dissolve away. All the models we need are in the desert and we must turn towards them". [31]

Talking About Abstraction is premised on the belief that Aboriginal painting assumes an authoritative influence on the practice of many non-Indigenous artists. It is primarily not a relationship of shared concerns, but of formal and technical intersections. A generation after Aboriginal art was first revealed to the wider world, its influence continues to become more profound, particularly on this (and in all likelihood the next) generation of artists, exposed in their formative years to the recent innovations that now define this most ancient of cultures.

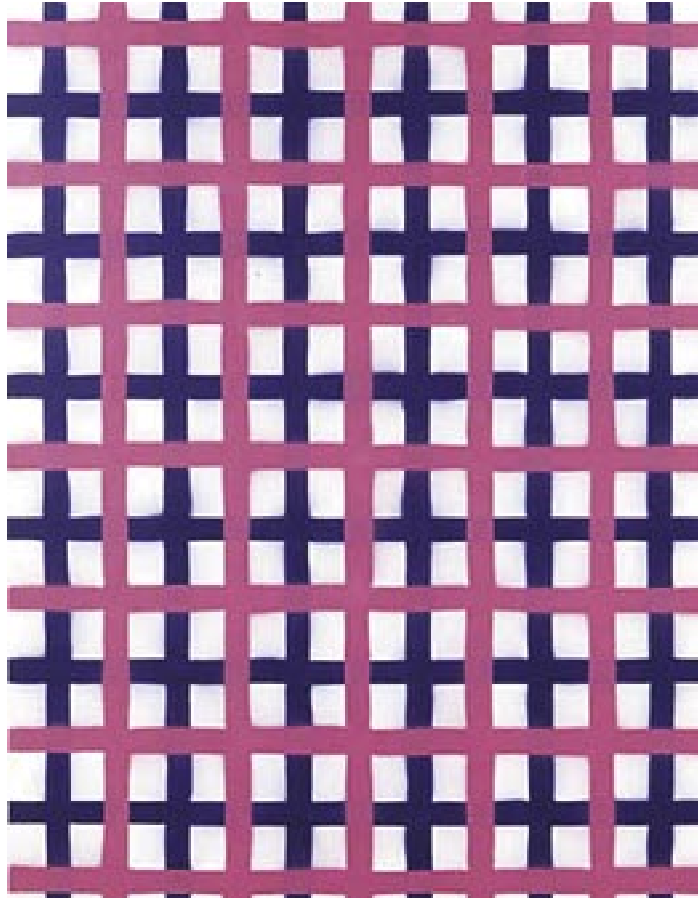
Felicity Fenner

[1] A.D.S. Donaldson in conversation with the author, March 2004
[2] Thanks to David McNeill helping clarify this point, May 2004
[3] All examples cited by Christopher Hodges in conversation with the author, 7/05/04
[4] This is an observation of recent work rather than definitive claim, given the rapid evolution of Aboriginal painting.
[5] Examples include *Abstraction: Spirit, Light, Pure, Form*, Tim Olsen Gallery, Sydney, 2001 and *in abstract: form and essence in recent Western Australian Painting*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth
[6] Gloria Petyarre and George Ward Tjungurrayi, for example, have been awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape painting in recent years, from a field of mostly non-Indigenous painters.
[7] Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. The exhibition included work by Debra Dawes, A.D.S. Donaldson and Emily Kame Kngwarreye.
[8] Victoria Lynn, *Abstraction,* Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1990, p. 5
[9] William J. Nuttall, *Contemporary Australian Abstraction*, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, 1996
[10] Felicity Fenner, 'Aboriginal Abstraction', *Art and Australia*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1997, p. 560
[11] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Abstraction and Intimacy*, lecture, Royal College of Art, London, 12/03/03
[12] Eric Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal Art' (1988), in *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 144
[13] Mitchell, op. cit.
[14] Ethics and Aesthetics Conference, Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (NSW Chapter), Art Gallery of New South Wales, 20/09/03
[15] Michaels, op. cit. p. 162
[16] Murphy, Bernice, *Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1981, p. 15
[17] Ethics and Aesthetics Conference, op. cit.
[18] *Te Maori*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984 and *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Asia Society Galleries, 1988
[19] Ethics and Aesthetics Conference, op. cit.
[20] Dawes in conversation with the author, January 2004
[21] Kathleen Brown, *Peppimenarti – transcending tradition*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2003 (unpaginated)
[22] Wyman, email to the author, May 2004
[23] For a discussion of Eurocentric responses to Kngwarreye's work, see Roger Benjamin, 'A New Modernist Hero' in *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere – Paintings from Utopia,* Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane and Macmillan, Sydney, 1998
[24] *Like, Art Magazine*, no. 8, RMIT, Melbourne, Autumn 1999, pp. 48-49
[25] Brennan in conversation with the author, May 2004
[26] Harper in conversation with the author, May 2004
[27] For a discussion of Tjungurrayi's practice, see Rex Butler's essays in *Spirit & Vision: Aboriginal Art*, Sammlung Essl, Kunst Der Gegenwart, Vienna, 2004, pp. 74-77, p. 113
[28] Donaldson in conversation with the author, March 2004
[29] *Look* magazine, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Nov/Dec. 2001
[30] Anne Loxley, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2003
[31] Interview with Elizabeth Pulie, *Lives of the Artists* #4, Winter 2003



Angela Brennan *Green Circles* 2003 oil on linen 201 x 181 cm collection Austcorp Group Pty Ltd courtesy the artist & Niagara Galleries, Melbourne © Angela Brennan, licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004

Debra Dawes *January* 2004 oil on canvas 180 x 260 cm collection the artist © the artist



A.D.S. Donaldson *Untitled* 2002 enamel on polyester 225 x 175 cm
collection the artist © the artist

Melinda Harper *Untitled* 2003 oil on canvas 183 x 300 cm courtesy the artist & Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne
© Melinda Harper, licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004

Paddy Bedford Jawalyi *Untitled* 2003 gouache on crescent board 51 x 76 cm
Laverty Collection, Sydney © the artist & Jirrawun Arts

Emily Kame Kngwarreye *Untitled (Awelye)* 1994 synthetic polymer paint on polyester 6 panels, each 190 x 57 cm Private Collection, courtesy Utopia Art Sydney
© Emily Kame Kngwarreye, licensed by VISCOPY, Australia 2004

Ildiko Kovacs *For You* 2004 oil on ply board 217 x 217 cm Laverty Collection, Sydney © the artist

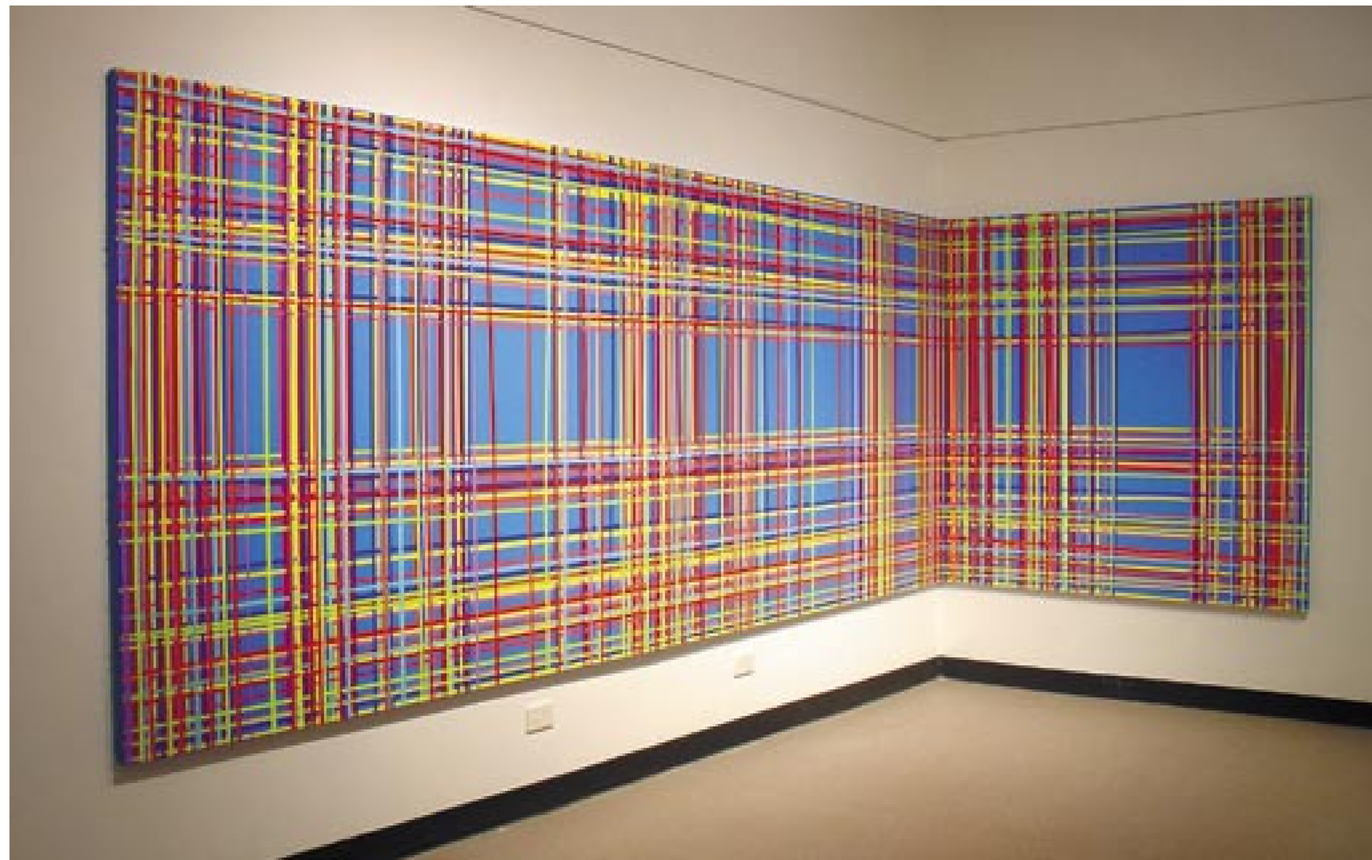
Mitjili Naparrula *Untitled* c.1998 acrylic on canvas 153 x 122 cm
Collection Angela Brennan, Melbourne © the artist

Dr George Tjapaltjarri *Untitled* 2003 acrylic on canvas 122 x 153 cm Collection Ildiko Kovacs, Sydney
© the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

George Tjungurrayi *Untitled* 1998 acrylic on canvas 61 x 91 collection Melinda Harper, Melbourne
© the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula *Untitled* 1998 acrylic on linen 152 x 183 cm Private Collection, courtesy Utopia Art Sydney
© the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

Regina Wilson *Syaw (Fish Net)* 2004 acrylic on canvas 120 x 160 cm
courtesy the artist & Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin © the artist



Jemima Wyman *Kimberley Blue* 2004 oil on canvas 160 x 560 cm courtesy the artist & Bellas Milani Gallery, Brisbane © the artist

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Felicity Fenner, Sydney, May 2004

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