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Outstations through art: Acrylic painting, self-determination and the history of the homelands movement in the Pintupi-Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Peter Thorley¹

Australia in the 1970s saw sweeping changes in Indigenous policy. In its first year of what was to become a famously short term in office, the Whitlam Government began to undertake a range of initiatives to implement its new policy agenda, which became known as ‘self-determination’. The broad aim of the policy was to allow Indigenous Australians to exercise greater choice over their lives. One of the new measures was the decentralisation of government-run settlements in favour of smaller, less aggregated Indigenous-run communities or outstations. Under the previous policy of ‘assimilation’, living arrangements in government settlements in the Northern Territory were strictly managed

1 I would like to acknowledge the people of the communities of Kintore, Kiwirrkura and Warakurna for their assistance and guidance. I am especially grateful to Monica Nangala Robinson and Irene Nangala, with whom I have worked closely over a number of years and who provided insights and helped facilitate consultations. I have particularly enjoyed the camaraderie of my fellow researchers Fred Myers and Pip Deveson since we began working on an edited version of Ian Dunlop’s 1974 Yayayi footage for the National Museum of Australia’s *Papunya Painting* exhibition in 2007. Staff of Papunya Tula Artists, Warakurna Artists, Warlungurru School and the Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tutaku (Purple House) have been welcoming and have given generously of their time and resources. This chapter has benefited from discussion with Bob Edwards, Vivien Johnson and Kate Khan.

with the aim of integration into a mainstream Australian way of life. Under the new policy ideal, Indigenous Australians would, in principle at least, be given greater freedom to live in the manner of their own choosing.

Outstations were not the only policy area in which the revitalisation of Indigenous cultures and the restoration of people's power to control their own destiny were seen to be mutually beneficial. Reform of the arts was also high on the new government's agenda. In 1973, the Australia Council for the Arts took over responsibility for Indigenous arts and crafts from the Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee, which was formed in 1970. The Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) was established as one of seven boards within the restructured Australia Council, under the auspices of its Chair, H. C. ('Nugget') Coombs, who had been an adviser to the Government on the arts and Indigenous policy since 1968 (Rowse 2000). In keeping with the Government's broader agenda, the board gave advisory and decision-making powers to its 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, providing Indigenous representation in the arts at a national level for the first time.

The National Museum of Australia (NMA) Aboriginal Arts Board collection was a product of the AAB and its operations from 1973 to 1981. The NMA's holdings from the Western Desert include paintings from Warakurna (Giles) and Yayayi, two outstations established in 1973 and operating under the new policies of the Whitlam Government. Yayayi (see Myers, this volume) was then home to Pintupi people who had moved from the government settlement of Papunya. Two years earlier, while living at Papunya, the Pintupi artists had been instrumental in the beginnings of the acrylic painting movement.

In 1971, Pintupi along with other groups, including Anmatyerre and Warlpiri who were living together in the confines of the government settlement, began to reproduce traditional designs using Western art materials, creating vibrant works that were to become internationally acclaimed. What began as a singular painting community at Papunya in 1971 has in the past two decades proliferated into a number of enterprises spread across the Western Desert and beyond. The Ngaanyatjarra artists living at Warburton and Warakurna were not directly involved in the formative years of the acrylic painting movement in and around Papunya, yet remained in contact with the artistic developments through relatives living at Yayayi. Many Pintupi who were among the original painting group in the 1970s identified with Warakurna and before European contact were neighbours of Ngaanyatjarra, with whom they shared a common language and ceremonial links.

Since its inception, acrylic painting has contributed to the fabric of Western Desert communities in many ways. As has been well documented elsewhere (for example, Altman 1988), art and craft have played a central role in the economic development of outstations and have continued to provide income support

through sales and government grants. My emphasis here is on the role of art in the construction of narratives. Narrative can powerfully influence how a community perceives itself and what it hopes to achieve as a collective. By extension, art can be a force for exercising the collective will of the community. Once confined to *Tjukurrpa* (creation) paintings, Western Desert acrylic painting has expanded to include new forms, styles and subjects, yet the primacy of narrative has remained a constant throughout its history. As such, the body of acrylic works produced in the Western Desert provides a unique record of outstations from 1971, when the painting movement began, to the present day.

The formal incorporation of Papunya Tula Artists in 1972 as an independent, Aboriginal-owned enterprise was a landmark in the development of Indigenous art in Australia, in many ways foreshadowing the new era of government policy in the 1970s (Johnson 2008). The emergence of painting as a commodity based on traditional practices tapped into the artists' attachment to country and aspirations to live a lifestyle of choice—principles that resonated with the Whitlam Government's policies on outstations and self-determination. In Papunya Tula, the artists were able to form their own enterprise in which they were actively involved in a decision-making capacity. The spate of new art centres that have arisen in the Western Desert region in recent decades, driven by the success of Papunya Tula, is a lasting legacy of this period.

Many of these new art centres have battled financially, as did Papunya Tula in its first decade. Yet art enterprises perform a vital role in the community beyond producing works for sale. The key painters are often the storytellers and shapers of oral history. Their paintings are the products of shared narratives of what is important in their lives and their hopes for the future. In this way, the act of painting and the discussions that take place around it have helped to sustain outstations in difficult times.

In this chapter, I argue that the production of paintings of country, under the patronage of the AAB, affected both the possibility and the desirability of Pintupi decentralisation. AAB funding supported the vision of Pintupi artists to return to country, which they expressed through the medium of acrylic painting. I then go on to look at the Warakurna paintings and how the construction of history orients Western Desert communities towards the future. The current generation of leaders, artists and schoolteachers is bringing the past to life through their desire to engage with historical images and narratives (cf. Thorley 2002). Reflecting on their struggles and achievements in the face of adversity, Western Desert communities are laying a foundation to imagine a desired future and move forward with confidence amid significant challenges posed by increasing government control and the threat of outstation closures.

The emergence of acrylic painting

The acrylic painting movement that sprang up at the Papunya settlement in the early 1970s was reflective of wider political currents, emerging on the cusp of the transition from 'assimilation' to 'self-determination'. Opposition to assimilation had been mounting for some time when the 1972 change of government in Canberra brought about an end to the policy, as Bob Edwards (2004: viii) recalled: 'When Geoffrey Bardon arrived in Central Australia the winds of change were already beginning to blow, through Aboriginal societies. The destructive impact of the long applied policy of assimilation was being challenged.'

While the first painting boards were being produced in Papunya, the settlement was continuing to function as an instrument of assimilation policy. Bardon, a schoolteacher, was operating to a degree in defiance of the Government in encouraging artists to take up acrylic painting at the time (Perkins 2009: 12). His efforts attracted unwanted attention from settlement administrators who he claims felt he had 'become too close to the Aboriginal people' (Bardon and Bardon 2004: 38).

By 1971, Pintupi were back living in Papunya after two attempts to establish separate communities (see Myers, this volume). The second such attempt was the short-lived Alumbra (Lampara) Bore, which ended in September 1970 after a brawl with police (Coombs 1974: 11). After the closure of Alumbra, Pintupi took up residence in a separate camp on the western side of Papunya. The NMA's holdings from this period include pencil and watercolour works on paper by Uta Uta Tjangala produced on the verandah of Bardon's house in Papunya in September 1971. These roughly executed works did not come with any accompanying documentation from Bardon, although the design of one of the drawings closely resembles a 1973 painting in the NMA's collection recorded by Myers (2002: 112) of Tjangala's conception site, Ngurrapalangu.

What Tjangala and the other Pintupi artists were expressing in their paintings may not have been entirely clear to Bardon at the time. Bardon was not a fluent Pintupi speaker and the artists were not fluent in English. Placenames rarely appear in the title of the paintings recorded by Bardon and his renderings of the early painting boards from 1971–72 suggest he struggled with the depth of knowledge and multilayered meanings embedded in the works. Bardon also had pressing personal issues to contend with while living in Papunya. By his own admission, he felt like an outsider in the white community and fell out with the Welfare Branch administrators over the Aboriginal management of Papunya Tula, which, he claimed, they opposed. This was the final straw that led to his departure in August 1972 (Bardon and Bardon 2004: 38–9).

Self-determination and the arts

The establishment of a separate Indigenous board for the arts within the larger Australia Council, with powers to make decisions and distribute funds, was one of the pillars of the Federal Government's Aboriginal self-determination policy. Whitlam expressed his vision for the AAB in the introduction to the catalogue for one of its first major international initiatives, known as the 'Rothmans Exhibition': 'The Aboriginal Arts Board exemplifies the Australian Government's policy of restoring to Aboriginal people the power of decision about their way of life within a community that honours and respects their contribution' (*Art of Aboriginal Australia* 1974).

The 14 board members were drawn from communities across Australia and were intended to be representative of both sexes and urban and remote areas, providing a national platform for Indigenous involvement in decision-making.

Robert ('Bob') Edwards, the founding director of the AAB, was a close follower of the Papunya painting movement from the outset (see also Johnson 2007; Myers 2002). As curator of anthropology at the South Australian Museum (1965–73), Edwards organised private exhibitions of Papunya paintings in Adelaide in 1972. Later, while he was director, the AAB subsidised Bardon's films and documentation projects about the painting movement at Papunya.² The Papunya painting enterprise strongly aligned with Edwards' background in cultural heritage and marketing (before becoming a heritage professional, he had worked for many years in the family fruit-growing business). Edwards' view of self-determination drew strongly on his cultural heritage background:

It's a pivotal thing because ... to say, forget your culture because if you want to get anywhere your kids have got to be educated and the more you cling to the past the less opportunity you've got for the future. We took another line that was if you've got your language and you've got pride in your culture you've got a confidence and you're more able to do it. (Bob Edwards, interview, 16 November 2010)

Minutes of AAB meetings, held in the NMA's archive, provide a fascinating record of the board's operation during its first decade. In its formation, structure and practice, the AAB explicitly recognised Indigenous protocols. Meetings were often held on country and local forms of decision-making were respected. In this way, the retention of culture was seen to be consistent with the goals of self-determination (on which outstation policy was also based).

² National Museum of Australia (hereinafter NMA) Archive: Minutes of the third AAB meeting, 11–13 August 1973.

A key topic in the board's early deliberations was the promotion of Indigenous art through international exhibitions and commissions. These lucrative commissions were to become highly sought after by the painters, who rated them as equivalent to vehicles. A single large painting, such as those commissioned by the AAB for overseas exhibitions and international diplomatic efforts, could alone raise enough money to purchase a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The desire for vehicles thus fed competition between communities to secure the best AAB commissions.

In 1973, the AAB acquired 17 works from Papunya and Yayayi for *Art of Aboriginal Australia*, an international touring exhibition sponsored by the tobacco giant Rothmans Stuyvesant. The Rothmans Exhibition, as it became known, toured 13 Canadian venues between 1974 and 1976 and was the first international exhibition of its kind. The works from Papunya and Yayayi featured alongside a selection of Hermannsburg watercolours, bark paintings, boomerangs and Tiwi sculptures. Around the time the AAB was acquiring works for the exhibition, the original Papunya painting group had recently been split by the Pintupi move to Yayayi (see Myers, this volume) and tensions increased as the two communities vied for access to the AAB commissions.

Artists from Papunya produced the majority of the acrylic works in the Rothmans Exhibition, and the two largest paintings. The two large collaborative works were painted by Long Jack Phillipus (assisted by Old Mick Walankari) and Kaapa Mbitjana and Billy Stockman (assisted by Dinny Nolan and Eddie Etamintja). Smaller individual works were painted by Yayayi artists John Tjakamarra, Shorty Lungkarta, Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra, Watuma Tjungurrayi (Charley Tjaruru) and Uta Uta Tjangala.

The two large works stood out from the rest of the exhibition. At 204 x 173 cm, both were much larger in size than any acrylic paintings previously produced. Kate Khan, senior project officer with the AAB from 1974 to 1980, recalls that all of the paintings were on wooden board, which made them extremely heavy and expensive to transport by air to Canada (canvas later became the standard medium).³ The large paintings and most of the smaller works were gifted to Canadian institutions at the culmination of the tour.⁴ Although Yayayi artists were well represented in the exhibition, they were overlooked for the two largest collaborative works painted by Papunya artists. These were the first of

3 Kate Khan, personal communication, 2011. Khan recalls discussing the advantages of using canvas as a medium with Peter Fannin at a milk bar in Alice Springs in 1974.

4 One painting by Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra, titled '*Story of the Women's Camp and the Origin of the Damper*', was credited in the catalogue as belonging to Machmoud Mackay, the general manager of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd, the commercial and sales arm of the AAB. Mackay, a Scotsman who became a Muslim, is acknowledged in the catalogue for his assistance. NMA acquired Tjakamarra's painting at auction in 2010.

many spectacular large paintings (mostly on canvas) commissioned for overseas venues, which became the hallmark of the AAB's promotional strategy during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Berrell 2009; Johnson 2007).

Yayayi's lack of representation on the AAB may have further aggravated the rift between the two communities. The artists who represented Papunya Tula on the board in the first decade of the painting movement—Tim Leura, Long Jack Phillipus and Billy Stockman—were all residents of Papunya. The Pintupi, whose country was further west and who had recently moved to Yayayi outstation, were not appointed to represent Papunya Tula on the AAB. The discrepancies between the two communities were a source of tension that became apparent when the board's director, Bob Edwards, attended a meeting at Yayayi in June 1974, the same month the Rothmans Exhibition opened in Stratford, Ontario.

Self-determination in practice: Yayayi, June 1974

While the AAB was empowered to make decisions over the allocation of resources, its limited funds were stretched by the needs of artists living in remote communities, particularly in regard to vehicles. Archival footage shot by Ian Dunlop (for Film Australia) at Yayayi in 1974 provides insight into how these pressures played out on the ground in a newly established outstation.⁵

On 6 June 1974, Edwards, accompanied by Long Jack Phillipus, visited the artists at Yayayi. Other key participants at the meeting were Jeff Stead (community adviser employed by DAA), Peter Fannin (art adviser for Papunya Tula) and Chris McGuigan (DAA). Dunlop's footage shows Bob Edwards mingling with male artists in the painting camp with Long Jack Phillipus and Fannin alongside. Phillipus was to become Papunya Tula's next representative on the AAB.

The following passages have been extracted from Dunlop's footage. Watuma Tjungurrayi, a prominent Yayayi councillor and important painter, is worried that the *mayutju* from the Government have not delivered the vehicles—the 'two big ones'—as anticipated. *Mayutju* means 'boss', a term the Pintupi men are using to refer to Bob Edwards.

'We got no truck,' Watuma says, '*Council-la tjurta* [all you councillors] *nyaampa kulirnin* [what are you thinking]?'

⁵ Ian Dunlop's footage from Yayayi has been the subject of research undertaken by the author with Fred Myers and Pip Deveson. Assistance has been provided by an Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies Research Grant and an Australian Research Council Linkage Project Grant (LP100200359) (in a partnership between The Australian National University, the National Museum of Australia and Papunya Tula Artists).

Some of the artists continue to paint while Watuma speaks.

Fannin and Edwards talk among themselves, seemingly oblivious to Watuma's concerns. Jeff Stead, the young community adviser at Yayayi, from the DAA, then appears and approaches Fannin.

'They're worried about the car, Papunya's car,' Stead says. 'I told them that you're going to get one and that's going to be used at Papunya and come out here one or two days. Billy Stockman [the current AAB member] and Jack Tjakamarra's gonna be in charge of it, right?'

'That's what we thought,' Fannin replies, 'but they're [the artists from Yayayi] directors [of Papunya Tula], too.'

'I think you better have a talk to them and explain, because I think they want to hear it from you,' Stead suggests.

Fannin then explains to the men that the AAB has promised a truck for Papunya Tula to be based at Papunya. As a consolation, he suggests that Yayayi apply for a vehicle in the next round of grants. Jack Phillipus, looking in the direction of Edwards, says, 'He might help. Canberra. He might help 'im with painting car. Might be next round [of funding]. I dunno.'⁶

At a later meeting at Yayayi, also filmed by Dunlop, Shorty Bruno (Yayayi councillor) talks about topping up money from the Yayayi Community Council (YCC) 'for that motorcar'. These additional funds were to include \$200 being paid to the community by the film crew—payment for their part in the film.

The YCC's request for assistance with funding of a vehicle was raised at the AAB's seventh meeting, on 22–24 July: 'Mr McGuigan (DAA) reported that a very vigorous bush community existed at Yai yai [sic]. The artists were happy and a number were painting on a full-time basis. The community required a vehicle and had applied to the board for a subsidy.'⁷

The YCC, the minutes go on to say, had applied for \$3,500 'for the subsidisation of vehicle costs and running expenses. The vehicle was to be used for gathering materials and transport of paintings and craftwork.' The application was approved. This vehicle was subsequently used by a group of Pintupi men in late 1974 to visit and engage with a distant Emu Dreaming ritual site in Western Australia (Myers, personal communication, 2015).

⁶ For another account of this meeting, from Fred Myers, who was present, see Myers (2007).

⁷ NMA: AAB Minutes, NMA Library.

As well as providing commissions, the AAB supported the struggling Papunya Tula Artists company through provision of grants. The board considered Papunya Tula's application for \$12,000 to cover operational expenses for a year, the art adviser's salary for six months and provision of a four-wheel-drive vehicle and running costs.

The minutes of the fourth meeting, on 28–29 April 1974, reveal the pressure placed on the board by applications for vehicle funding. The board sought to deflect the issue by highlighting the responsibility of the DAA: 'Mr McGuigan reported that the Department [of Aboriginal Affairs] had rejected the Arts Board's recommendation for the purchase of vehicles for communities at Yirrkala and Papunya.' The onus for vehicle funding was placed back onto the DAA, and the notes continue that 'the Board was concerned the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was failing to accept responsibility for assisting with the purchase and maintenance of vehicles'.

The day after returning from Yayayi, on 7 June 1974, Bob Edwards wrote a gloomy letter to Nugget Coombs. His letter records that 'I returned today from an all too brief visit to Ernabella, Amata, Papunya, Yayayi and Yuendumu. At the moment I can only relate my feelings of sadness and frustration at the situation existing in these communities.'⁸ The letter also refers to Yayayi and the general issue of vehicle funding, in regard to which Edwards states: 'At Yayayi a few miles distant [from Papunya], where one sees some hope for a new future, the community is frustrated by lack of transport as their few vehicles have fallen into disrepair.'⁹

Edwards and Coombs shared a very similar perspective in approaching the development of Indigenous art and the maintenance of cultural heritage within the broader framework of service delivery to remote outstations, to which vehicles were integral. As Edwards further states in the letter:

The Board will have to tackle this problem as vehicles are essential to viable art and craft enterprises. They provide access to vast timber resources and obviate the necessity to devastate the limited supplies near settlements. We will have to grasp the nettle in the near future.¹⁰

Yet the practicalities of supplying and maintaining vehicles in remote settings remained a challenge that had to be balanced with other board priorities. Constant requests for vehicles placed a strain on the board's attempt to carry out its functions as a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts body empowered to make decisions and to manage the funds at its disposal.

⁸ NMA: Letter from Robert Edwards to Dr H. C. Coombs, 7 June 1974, File 11/387.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

Ultimately, the decision-making powers of the board were to be tested on a number of fronts. The obligation of members to family, kin and community and the balancing of remote and urban interests weighed heavily on the board's decisions. In the director's role, Edwards was essential to the smooth operation of the board and the success of many of its initiatives. In the meeting at Yayayi on 6 June, it is clear that Pintupi saw Edwards as a *mayutju* (boss) and representative of 'the Government' and 'Canberra', and their attempts to win him over suggested they regarded him, rather than an Indigenous-controlled board, as crucial to their objectives—a view that did not entirely conform with Whitlam's vision for the board as one of 'restoring to Aboriginal people the power of decision'.

As demonstrated by the 6 June meeting, the principles on which the board was founded did not always align with local priorities. At the local level, the tensions between Yayayi and Papunya were a mobilising force for Pintupi, who were intent on securing resources for themselves as a separate group. By their own accounts, Pintupi believed they were not well treated while living at Papunya and look back on this period in their lives as a 'sad' time. The rift that developed with Papunya around resourcing issues only reinforced their belief in the need for an independent community.

Since resettling on their own land in the 1980s, Pintupi have developed a reputation for self-funding projects with the proceeds of art sales. When unable to convince the Government to support their own ventures, Pintupi have taken it on themselves to find a way. Notable examples include the pioneering of dialysis for renal patients in the bush and a communal swimming pool at Kintore, both financed through charity auctions of Pintupi paintings. Historically, there is a pattern of Pintupi artists securing resources through art proceeds to make their vision a reality, the seeds of which were sown in earlier periods when they were able to utilise the AAB's grants and commissions.

Moving back to country

Pintupi painting remained dependent on AAB support throughout 1970s. Many large canvases were produced during this period and these commissions helped keep the struggling Papunya Tula Artists company afloat. As well as generating income for the artists, the production of paintings, both large and small, connected the artists with their country—still far from where they lived—through the visualised imaginary. Paintings expressed what the artists hoped to achieve in terms of getting back on country. For the Pintupi artists, the act of painting was anticipatory.

While the desire to establish communities on Pintupi soil remained foremost in the minds of the artists, Pintupi country lay hundreds of kilometres west of Papunya and was, for the most part, physically inaccessible. Before establishing a permanent settlement at Warlungurru (Kintore) in 1981, Pintupi made irregular forays to visit sacred sites in their remote homeland areas. For example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) sponsored filming trips to record ceremonies at Yumari (in 1969), Yarru Yarru (1970), Mitukatjirri (1972) and Yawalyurru (1974).¹¹

Yawalyurru and sites linked to it by the Native Cat (*Kurninka*) story held special significance for Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra, who left the desert in 1966, joining his fellow countrymen at Papunya. A series of 31 paintings, recorded and analysed by Myers (2002) from 1973 to 1975, reveals the importance of Yawalyurru and its associated sites as a source of inspiration in the artist's imaginary. His paintings express a longing to visit Yawalyurru and his heartfelt desire to establish an outstation at nearby Kulkurta. However, the inaccessibility of the terrain has been a major obstacle to the development of a viable community in the area. Before the 1974 trip filmed by Dunlop, Yanyatjarri can be seen trying to convince Long that it would be possible to reach Yawalyurru without numerous sandhill crossings. With the journey under way, vehicles are seen floundering in deep sand while cresting high dunes. The group of men reached Yawalyurru and performed the ceremony, but because of the restricted nature of the place and ceremony, filming was suspended before they got there. In 1987, another AIAS-sponsored expedition mounted from Kintore took six days with four fully equipped vehicles. Yanyatjarri moved a step closer to Yawalyurru after the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* enabled him to shift to Kintore in 1981, where he lived for a short period before moving to Tjukurla (WA). Sadly, however, he passed away in 1992 without ever resettling on his own country.

In July 1981, Uta Uta Tjangala began work on the giant *Yumari* canvas while living at Papunya, five years after the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. *Yumari* is the most celebrated of all the large AAB-commissioned canvases held by the NMA. The title of the work, it could be said, is wrongly attributed to the nearby ceremonially related rockhole site of Yumari, part of the same Dreaming. The giant anthropomorphic being that dominates the canvas, however, is the artist's conception totem, *Tjurntamutu*, who resides in a cave at Ngurrapalangu, several kilometres to the east of Yumari. In July 1981, Myers recorded the artist's hopes to return to Ngurrapalangu, in a four-wheel-drive LandCruiser funded by the proceeds of the painting (Myers 2002: xv).

11 Initially, it was intended to record a ceremony at Yawalyurru but by 1974 the Pintupi men decided it was no longer acceptable to do such filming. Jeremy Long took the men on the trip anyway, honouring the obligation to allow them to return. Filming of the journey, but not the ceremony or the sacred site, was permitted to Dunlop in exchange for providing additional vehicles. Myers, personal communication, 2015.

In the late 1980s, working as a teacher-linguist at Kintore (NT), I accompanied Uta Uta several times to Ngurrapalangu and the nearby outstation of Muyin (WA) where he occasionally lived. By then, Kintore had become a homeland resource centre, servicing a network of outstations (or bores) within the surrounding area. The DAA outstation coordinator based at Kintore appointed a full-time mechanic just to maintain the Aboriginal Benefit Trust Account (ABTA) vehicles used by a small population who were intermittently living on outstations. A track was graded to each bore that was equipped with a hand pump. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, dwellings and other infrastructure were added. Despite these improvements, none of the outstations became continuously occupied and in the past two decades they have largely fallen into disrepair. While some groups have moved further afield to Kiwirrkura and Tjukurla in Western Australia, Pintupi at Kintore, now close to their country, have shown little interest in permanently occupying smaller outstations. Nonetheless, outstations continued to be visited and used as a base for hunting trips and to access nearby sacred sites, and vehicles remained essential to these activities.

While at Ngurrapalangu in 1989, Uta Uta spoke to me passionately about his conception site as *Tjuntamurtuku ngurra* (Place of *Tjuntamurtu*). He wanted people to know that *Tjuntamurtuku ngurra* is an important place (*purlkanya*). He hoped that, in taking me there, he would get two Toyota four-wheel-drive vehicles, 'two really big ones' ('*Mutukayi kutjarra mantjilku purlkanya Toyota*'). He talked about how he had brought other whitefellas to the site and told them this important story but they had not been forthcoming with the money and vehicles he wanted ('*Wiyarni yungu mani mutukayi*').

Uta Uta's concerns as related to me in 1989 were remarkably similar to those he conveyed to Myers at Papunya in 1981 and those expressed by Watuma Tjungurrayi at the vehicle meeting filmed by Ian Dunlop at Yayayi in 1974. For the senior Pintupi men, sacred sites, vehicles and money dovetailed into how they understood their situation and what they wanted to achieve from their art in terms of providing funds and communicating their ambitions among themselves and to a wider network of potential supporters.

Warakurna

The artists of Warakurna (formerly referred to as Giles), a Ngaanyatjarra outstation established in the same year as Yayayi, began to paint as a collective in 2004. The first works produced by the Warakurna Artists enterprise were *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) paintings with affinities to early Papunya works. In 2011, Warakurna Artists embarked on a project to document their history visually, producing a set of highly figurative works that combined traditional and

Western forms of representing landscape. These ‘history paintings’, as they became known, specifically reference the arrival of Europeans and subsequent events as they impacted on the development of the community.

Figure 8.1 *Giles Weather Station*, 2011, by Dorcas Tinamayi Bennett. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-030

The history of Warakurna has been influenced by its close proximity to Giles Weather Station, a facility set up by the Department of the Interior in 1956 under the Anglo-Australian weapons program. The consequences of weapons research on local populations—Aboriginal and European—came under scrutiny in press reports at the time and have been examined in histories produced by the Department of Defence and the Bureau of Meteorology (Day 2007; Morton 1987). In 1965, the anthropologist Donald Thomson, who had been working in the area, wrote to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior: ‘It appears to me a tremendous pity that the Government of Western Australia, aided by the Native Affairs people employed by the Commonwealth on the rocket range and under direction from the Weapons Research Establishment, have concentrated on depopulating the desert.’¹²

¹² NMA: Letter from D. Thomson to R. Kingsland, File 30/2736, Part 2—Liaison Correspondence on Departmental Policy with Secretary Department of Interior.

A series of paintings by artists Jean Burke, Judith Chambers and Eunice Porter provides another perspective on the relationship between *Yarnangu* (the Western Desert word for ‘person’, especially an Aboriginal person)¹³ and defence personnel. The painting *Macaulay and MacDougall* by Jean Burke shows rations being delivered by these two well-known patrol officers in yellow trucks. ‘We were all happy to see them’, says Burke in her oral testimony supplied with the painting. ‘People would get in the truck and go with them to the mission camp’, Judith Chambers recalls in the artist statement accompanying her painting *Mr MacDougall and Tommy Dodd*.

Figure 8.2 *Macaulay and MacDougall*, 2011, by Jean Inyalanka Burke. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-020

13 This is a variant of the word *Anangu*, as the Pitjantjatjarra pronounce it.

Figure 8.3 *Mr MacDougall and Tommy Dodd*, 2011, by Judith Yinyika Chambers. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-016

Rather than the instruments of an anonymous 'Weapons Research Establishment', patrol officers were viewed as people with whom Yarnangu had real engagements. Early contact history is seen through the lens of interpersonal relationships with known individuals. Yarnangu regard themselves as active agents in their resettlement history, rather than passively responding to changes in external circumstances.

People from the Warakurna area eventually took up residence at Warburton, 250 km to the south-west, where the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) established a settlement in 1934. At Warburton, children lived in the dormitory and were looked after by missionaries while attending school. Despite the mission's intervention, children continued to maintain a connection with families and country. In Eunice Porter's paintings, the close proximity of children and parents can be seen in *Waiting for Shop*, in which children are depicted lining up for school as parents wait outside the nearby shop. Adults exchanged dingo skins for rations, which were used to supplement a traditional diet. The related painting, titled *Holiday Time*, shows children returning home during the school holidays to be with parents who were living on country, where they would engage in a range of traditional activities (see Brooks and Plant, this volume). Porter remembers fondly these times spent with family on country. 'At night the children went to sleep. The mothers and fathers would dance and sing. It was a good time.'

Figure 8.4 *Waiting for Shop*, 2011, by Eunice Yunurupa Porter. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-023

Figure 8.5 *Holiday Time*, 2011, by Eunice Yunurupa Porter. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-022

When a settlement for Aboriginal people was established at Docker River in 1968 (see Long, this volume), Yarnangu with affiliations to the Warakurna area moved there to be closer to their homelands. *Warburton Mission Leaving Time* by Judith Chambers shows people packing up and leaving Warburton for Docker River.

‘People heard about the new settlement starting up at Docker River. That was near our Ngurra [country] in the east so my family went there,’ the artist recalls.

Figure 8.6 *Warburton Mission Leaving Time*, 2011, by Judith Yinyika Chambers. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-024

After 1969, as part of changing policies, Aboriginal people were paid their own social security benefits individually. The ability to manage their own cash increased their capacity to purchase and manage their own vehicles. A graded road between Giles and Docker River made Warakurna accessible by car. The road and amenities available to staff at Giles Meteorological Station attracted increasing numbers of Ngaanyatjarra people back to their country. By 1973, a reasonably stable population was established near the weather station, which then attracted support from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Coombs 1974: 10). Limited assistance could be provided by the weather station, although as the population increased to more than 200 people, the relationship with station personnel was tested (Day 2007: 393).

The entangled history of the weather station and the Warakurna community can be read as simulacra of wider political shifts taking place federally. Formerly run by the Department of Supply, Giles was taken over by the Bureau of Meteorology in 1972. Significantly, the change of management took place within a milieu of growing support for Indigenous people's aspirations to live in a manner of their

own choosing. According to Day's (2007) account, the bureau's more relaxed approach and the growing assertiveness of the local Aboriginal community were factors contributing to an uneasy relationship. He writes:

Previously, there had been strict rules regarding the relations between station staff and the indigenous inhabitants, with a view to protecting the latter's traditional lifestyle. But the increased contact as a result of the missions and the station's presence inevitably eroded that lifestyle. By the 1970s, Aboriginal people around Giles were living radically different lives. In one way they were more independent, controlling their own communities, but they were also increasingly dependent on European foodstuffs and other material goods. (Day 2007: 393)

Day goes on to describe these as 'testing times', yet the weather station continued to operate, because its value 'was too great for it to be lightly abandoned' (Day 2007: 394). Amee Glass, a linguist with the Summer Institute of Linguistics working for the Warburton Bible Project, saw the weather station as critical in the history of the outstation: 'As I recall their first community adviser was someone who had been a weather station employee and left that job to become the community adviser.'¹⁴

As Warakurna developed, other groups living at Docker River and Warburton were planning moves back to the Blackstone and Cavenagh ranges. The painting *Going Home* by Eunice Porter captures the process of decentralisation as it unfolded in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in 1973. She tells of a 'big meeting' with the Government at Warburton, after which people went their separate ways. In the bottom right-hand corner, the painting depicts groups of people having a meeting. Moving clockwise, distinct groups are shown rolling swags and loading trucks to go back to their separate homelands. Lines in the centre represent the roads on which they travelled.

Figure 8.7 *Going Home*, 2011, by Eunice Yunurupa Porter. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-026

The implementation of the Commonwealth's self-determination policy is the subject of the collaborative painting *Cutline, Warakurna to Warburton* by Judith Chambers, Dorcas Bennett and Martha Ward. Under the Commonwealth's new policy, the Warakurna community was able to initiate its own projects with government backing. The priority for the newly formed Warakurna Council was the construction of a road to Warburton to replace the existing route that had been graded by Len Beadell of Gunbarrel Highway fame. 'The Commonwealth paid people a wage at Warakurna—that was how it was started' (Ameë Glass, interview, 22 February 2013).

Figure 8.8 *Cutline, Warakurna to Warburton*, 2011, by Judith Yinyika Chambers, Martha Ward and Dorcas Tinamayi Bennett. Courtesy of Warakurna Artists.

Photo: Katie Shanahan, National Museum of Australia, nma.img-ci20122838-042

The new road was cleared by hand, depicted as a ribbon of activity running through the centre of the painting. The route followed a series of rockholes between Warburton and Warakurna, which are shown on either side. Teams from Warakurna and Warburton worked on the route from both ends, using axes. People who remember the road have differing points of view—rough road or signal achievement: ‘It was extremely rough to drive over because of the ant bed’, according to Glass:

[I]n those days they had no money. The problem was the roads were the responsibility of the Shire and no Yarnangu were represented on the Council. When universal suffrage came in, Ian Newberry’s father was the first person on the Council. That was probably when they first graded the road. (Amee Glass, interview, 22 February 2013)

Although the condition of the road was poor by current standards, Ngaanyatjarra accounts focus on the collaborative project of building the road and what it meant to be working on projects they had conceived themselves. *Cutline, Warakurna to Warburton* celebrates the achievements of the fledgling community as a collective. ‘All the families helped’, recalled Judith Chambers, ‘even the kids came along’.

Building a future

The views of outstation history depicted in the Warakurna paintings are similar in many respects to the comments made by Pintupi respondents when interviewed about Yayayi (Myers, this volume)—comments that emphasised self-reliance and their own agency in separating from Papunya. The Warakurna paintings convey a sense of pride in what people were able to achieve as a collective by returning to country and working together to build their future in the 1970s.

Maisie Nungurrayi, one of a younger generation who paints for Warakurna Artists, has spoken of the importance of art to Western Desert communities: *‘Tjukurrpa watjalku paintingmara, ngurra nyuntupa Countrytjarra. And yanku malaku nyaku mularrpa ngaanya* [When you paint you are telling stories about your country. Then you will go back and see those actual places] (Nungurrayi Ward 2011).¹⁵

For Yarnangu artists, paintings and their stories are grounded in the physicality of place. The act of painting connects the artist with their country through their imaginations, yet this is not enough. The paintings and the stories *oblige* the artist to reconnect physically with those places. ‘You *will* go back’, in the words of Maisie.

Painting, in this sense, has a role to play in reaffirming values and shaping future action. In the process of painting, certain narratives tend to reoccur and become dominant as they are communicated and consensually validated. Narratives are resources that can be drawn on to imagine how an ideal future would look (Elliott 1999). Acrylic paintings complement deeply held values and compelling narratives, conveying to others a sense of the world as it is and should be. The sharing of stories through paintings thus helps strengthen the resolve of the community and provides direction for people to move forward in accordance with their values.

Given the way in which painting may serve to orient people towards a future of their own conception, the AAB’s marrying of art and self-determination was, in principle, well conceived. While the board’s decisions were constrained by competing interests and priorities, its financial support was critical to the success of the acrylic painting movement in the first decade. In their dealings with the AAB, Pintupi were able to formulate their own goals and saw the potential of art sales to generate income for their own projects. At the meeting attended by Bob Edwards at Yayayi, Pintupi leaders were clear about what they wanted

15 Maisie lives at Warnarn, an outstation south-west of Warakurna and paints for Warakurna Artists. Her father, Yunmul Tjapaltjarri (known to many as ‘Doctor George’), worked as the *ngangkari* (traditional healer) for the Pintupi medical service in the 1980s and was a painter for Papunya Tula in the 1970s.

to achieve and the resources required to make it happen. Emboldened by past achievements, Pintupi have been able to approach the future at each turn with a renewed sense of confidence.

Stories of success are popular among Western Desert people today—how they established their own outstations, art centres and health services, how they did not need to wait for government, and so on. The incorporation of these kinds of stories into contemporary discourse has potential to mobilise people to work together towards a future of their own choice and to make it a reality. There is a link between positive affirmation of the desire for particular outcomes and the likelihood of those outcomes occurring. Western Desert communities are now at a critical juncture. Those who experienced a significant part of their life in the bush have all but passed on. The current generation of artists is aware of the challenge of sustaining homeland communities in the face of dwindling knowledge of country, and visual imagery is increasingly being used to convey a sense of how people got to be where they are today.

The shift to documentary forms of painting and increased interest in archival film and photography suggest a greater self-consciousness among Western Desert communities in how the past is viewed and linked to the future.¹⁶ Art is being used not only to record history but also to provide commentary on what is happening now, as witnessed in the form of paintings that document the process of art-making itself and other contemporary issues such as land management and governance. It is unclear whether works based on these types of narratives will prove to be commercially viable, yet the intention of this emerging practice appears to be directed as much inwardly as to engage or appease an external market. Western Desert people today, it seems, are commenting on their own practice and reflecting on their past more often and in different ways, as the need to understand and communicate where they have come from becomes increasingly vital to the well-being and longevity of their communities.

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¹⁶ The significance attached to photographic images seems to be shifting in the Western Desert along with understandings of history and the desire to engage with the past (cf. Thorley 2002). The emergence of new painting forms may be linked to the way Western Desert people are viewing themselves in film and other visual media. The relaxing of restrictions on photographic materials appears to be a related phenomenon.

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