



Kicking up the dust in Warmun

Tim Melville travels to Western Australia to meet a group of Gija artists whose works can be read as contemporary abstraction – and as cultural documents whose history dates back thousands of years.

When I started planning a trip to visit the Aboriginal artists at Warmun in Western Australia I didn't realise it would take longer to get there than it does to fly to London. The eight-hour flight from Auckland to Perth arrives too late to make a connection – meaning an overnight stay – then there's a three-hour flight northeast to Kununurra and a 200-kilometre drive down the Great Northern Highway to the Art Centre in the East Kimberley. The views from the aircraft over red earth, salt lakes and long highways are spectacular, of course, but it's really only once you're on the ground and you've started to drive that you realise the earth really is that red, the country really does smell of spinifex, and the roads really are Mad-Max-straight.

I'd punctuated my drive with plenty of photo stops, so by the time I turned off the highway and drove in to Warmun it was dark and very quiet. Adam Boyd, the Art Centre Manager, had generously offered to put me up for three nights at his home in The Old Post Office – and he came

out to meet me – but I won't forget those first few moments: climbing out of the rental car, stretching and yawning, thousands of miles from the nearest city, and looking up to see an enormous crescent moon and constellations of stars against inky black sky.

Warmun is a community of about 400 people. At its heart is the Art Centre where more than 50 established and emerging Gija artists continue the traditions begun in the mid-1970s by painters including Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie. Australia's physical and cultural terrain has meant that for many remote Aboriginal communities their art-making traditions have become an important source of income. Although, it should be said, the business of Aboriginal art is not just about money. In the face of poverty, racism, and the 'tyranny of distance' Aboriginal art-making also works, crucially, to maintain, celebrate and share cultural knowledge, helping keep it alive for future generations.

Opposite page: aerial view of Lake Disappointment, halfway between Perth and Kunanurra

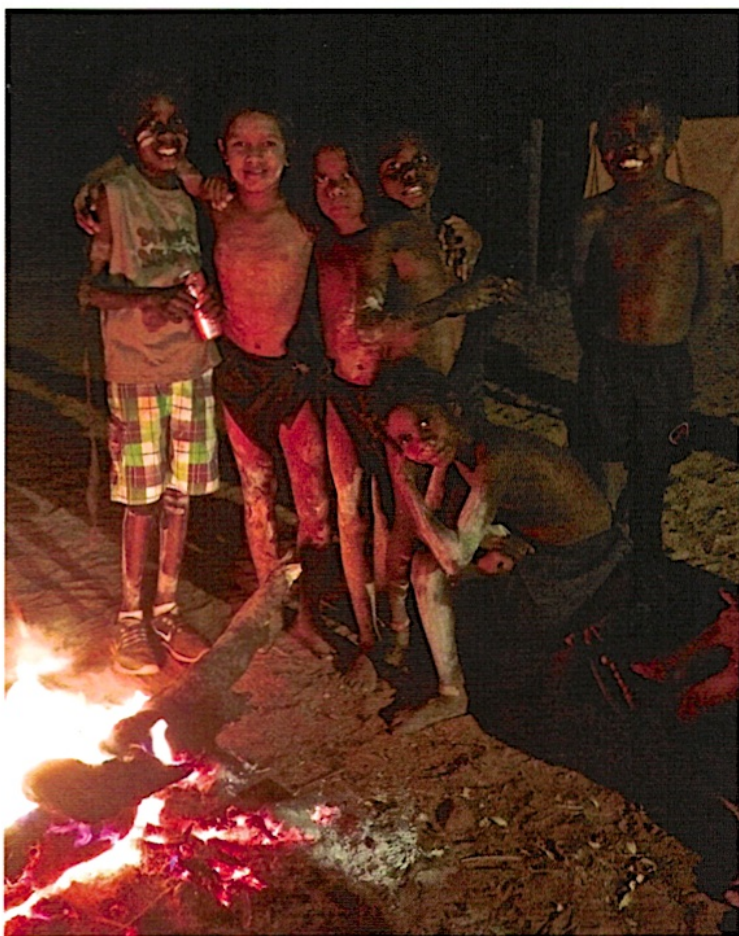
Right (from top): Tim Melville and Lena Nyadbi at Gija language class; young *Gurrir Gurrir* performers after the *Joonba*

Warmun artists use crushed ochres, charcoal and natural earth pigments to make artworks that draw on traditional *Ngarrankarni* (Dreaming) stories as well as contemporary perspectives. Uniquely, they literally paint their country with their country and it's this velvety, organic quality that has contributed to success not only in Australia and New Zealand, where they're represented in all the Australian State Gallery collections and Auckland Art Gallery's Chartwell Collection, but also in Paris, where a significant body of work has been acquired by the Musée du Quai Branly. Of which more later...

Life at Warmun feels a bit like life on a marae. You probably wouldn't be woken by flocks of squawking gulls on a marae, nor have to contend with cane toads, but as on a marae, there's time for talking and there are lots of cups of tea. Nothing feels rushed. The day goes at a pace that suits the old people, and although a new generation of artists is being nurtured, it's mainly the senior artists – men and women in their 70s and 80s – who come to paint regularly. Despite its laid-back mood, the Centre is busy and has an infrastructure of systems and dedicated employees, both European and Aboriginal, who keep things running smoothly. I met the coordinators for the Studio and Cultural Programmes – Alana Hunt and Anna Crane – whose jobs include ensuring the artists are comfortable and well looked after, whether with fresh cups of tea or fresh buckets of ochre. Alana and Anna are also responsible for running the Media Lab and for facilitating language and culture projects. The Art Centre has a gallery where artworks are sold – mainly to passing camper-van tourists – and there are dedicated areas for stretching canvases, mixing ochres, and for photography and cataloguing work before it's crated and freighted to galleries and museums in Australia and overseas. (It was reassuring to be shown the rack with the "Tim Melville Gallery" label.)

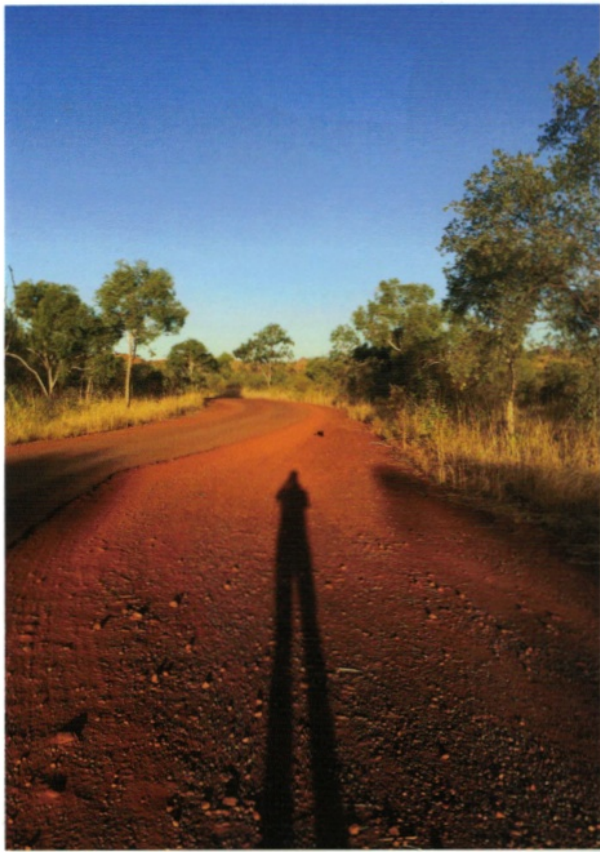
The main reason I wanted to visit Warmun, though, was to meet the artists. I didn't want to get in their way but I was keen to let them know who the random New Zealander promoting their work on the other side of the Tasman was. Because I'd recently shown her work in New Zealand, I introduced myself to Phyllis Thomas first.

Phyllis is in her early 80s and is one of Warmun's senior women. I watched her making one of her trademark *Gemerre* (Scarification) diptychs using a combination of black ochre and a pinkish-red ochre made from mixing red and white ochre together. Phyllis's *Gemerre* paintings can be read as contemporary abstraction and, simultaneously, as cultural documents with a history going back thousands



of years. The striped markings running down the canvas are representative of the traditional marks *Gija* people used to incise on each other for ceremonial activities or, as Phyllis said, "This is them scars that the old people used to cut across their bodies. Their leg, arm and stomach. This keep 'em safe when going across rivers, so that the Rainbow Serpent don't get you."

I also met senior artists Mabel Juli (81) and Lena Nyadbi (78). In 2006 Lena was one of eight Aboriginal artists chosen to make works for the inauguration of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. (Michael Parekowhai and Fiona Pardington were selected from New Zealand.) Lena's *Jimbirla* (Spearhead) design was installed in raised relief across



Opposite page (clockwise from top left): casting a long shadow on the Great Northern Highway between Kununurra and Warmun; painted rocks near Turkey Creek; Warmun Art Centre with men's painting area in foreground, the main Painting Shed behind the Centre's gigantic Boab tree, and the Old Post Office; Paintings by Mabel Juli in the Warmun Gallery, including a suite of *Garnkiny and Wardel Ngarrangagarni* (Moon and Star Dreamings); sign at the entrance to the Warmun community 'Bottom Camp'; Lena Nyadbi's *Jimbirla* (Spearhead) design on the exterior of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris



Phyllis Thomas working on a *Gemerre* diptych using black ochre and a red/white ochre mix

the museum's concrete façade, and in 2013 – even more spectacularly – her *Dayiwul Lirlmim* (Barramundi Scales) design was re-created in a 700-square-metre format on the museum's rooftop. The installation, which represents an ancestral Dreaming about the creation of diamonds, was designed so it could be viewed from the nearby Eiffel Tower. (After my Warmun visit I travelled to Paris where I made a point of visiting the Musée du Quai Branly. Lena's *Jimbirla* work looks stunning, floating across its façade.)

Mabel Juli is one of Warmun's most revered artists, and arguably best known for her *Garnkiny Ngarrangagarni* (Moon and Star Dreaming) paintings. Back in 2009, it was her large black-and-white *Garnkiny* painting that stopped me in my tracks at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and encouraged me to approach the Art Centre to ask if I could work with their artists in New Zealand.

Mabel often paints her ancestral Dreaming story of the Moon (who used to be a man) and the Star (his promised wife). In Mabel's Dreaming, the Moon (*Garnkiny*) was betrothed to a particular woman (whose name was *Wardel*), but fell suddenly in love with another... who turned out, inconveniently, to be the mother of his betrothed. Her people told him in no uncertain terms that they couldn't marry and, moreover, that in kinship terms she was the wrong 'skin' for him. This upset him so much that he climbed to the top of a nearby hill (*Yarin*) and called down to them, "You will all die. You will all be white bones. But I will only die for three days and then I'll come back." Which, of course, is what the moon does for the three nights each month when we see him as a crescent. I'm glad to have been in Warmun when Mabel's moon was out.

On my last day in Warmun I joined one of the weekly Gija language classes. The class is open to everyone, although it seems it's mainly the old people who attend. Frances Kofod,

who runs the class, is a gifted linguist and language scholar who has worked in the Gija community for many years. Her project has been to record the old people's stories and help preserve language and stories for future generations. During our lesson the same Gija phrase was repeated often enough that even I could make a mangled attempt at pronouncing it, but the repeated running consonants made this very tricky. The word *Ngenaneningki* being especially problematic...

My last night coincided with a celebration to mark Anna Crane's temporary return to the city after a long period at Warmun as one of the centre's coordinators. The community put on a *Joonba* (corroboree), which was an opportunity also to teach the young boys some of the dances from Warmun's famous *Gurrir Gurrir*. This is a song cycle and dance ceremony based on stories revealed to artist Rover Thomas in a dream, and it's danced today, as it was then, using painted boards to illustrate the narrative. I'd seen it performed once before – in the atrium of the Art Gallery of New South Wales – but seeing it here was a completely different experience.

The temperature drops rapidly in Warmun after the sun goes down so people were wrapped up warmly in front of a fire. The dancers were kicking up dust and there was the knocking wooden rhythm of clap-sticks ringing out into the night. The excited young boys' energy was infectious and the senior men and women, including Phyllis and Mabel, were singing and chanting. The atmosphere was mesmerising, and as I said my goodbyes that night, I knew I'd been gifted the perfect end to my visit. I'm hoping it will be the first of many.

For more information about the artists and the Art Centre visit warmunart.com.au. The next exhibition of Warmun artists at Tim Melville Gallery is in early 2015.