

WA's first Indigenous art centre celebrates 35 years of supporting Kimberley artists

ABC Kimberley / By Vanessa Mills and Jessica Hayes

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-01/was-first-aboriginal-art-centre-warlayirti-celebrates-35-years/101389900>



Artists completed a piece from an on-country visit along the remote Canning Stock Route. (ABC Kimberley: Jessica Hayes)

A cultural and artistic success story has emerged out of the clumps of golden spinifex and stony red landscape that is the Great Sandy Desert.

Warlayirti Arts was the first Indigenous art centre in Western Australia when it formed 35 years ago in Balgo, 260 kilometres south of Halls Creek, in the Kimberley.

The centre's sense of purpose has been reignited by an anniversary exhibition created over the past two years through expeditions deep into the traditional homelands of its 400 artists.

Many artists and families visited places they had only ever heard about in stories and songs, for the first time.



Warlayirti artists put the final touches to a canvas depicting country around the Canning Stock Route(ABC Kimberley: Vanessa Mills)

The large collection of new works was unveiled to visitors, who until recently had been locked out of Balgo, as two-and-a-half years of pandemic laws prohibited access to Aboriginal communities.



Visitors browse the new works inside the art centre.(ABC Kimberley: Vanessa Mills)

The three-day anniversary celebration, which included surrounding desert communities and art dealers from Sydney, was a milestone that artist Angie Tchooga was proud to see.



Young performers carry out a traditional dance in front of onlookers. (ABC Kimberley: Jessica Hayes)

The Kukatja Djaru woman was one of Warlayirti's first artists in 1987, learning to paint in a classroom at the adult education centre.

"It's been a long time — I'm really proud of this arts centre," Ms Tchooga said.

"I do my Sturt Creek painting ... waterlilies. We used to go there as little kids and I feel happy painting my country."



Angie Tchooga has been painting with Warlayirti since it began in 1987(ABC Kimberley: Vanessa Mills)

Centre chairman Matthew West, a Kukatja Ngaanyatjarra man, feels he is continuing his father's cultural and artistic legacy.

In the early 1980s his father was one of a pioneering group of men who started painting their stories on wood boards — [which later vanished](#).

"The old people have been passing on their knowledge to the younger generation. This art centre celebration is amazing," he said.



Matthew West is proud to continue his father's artistic and cultural legacy (ABC Kimberley: Vanessa Mills)

Mr West said the centre's recent bush trips, up to 1,000 kilometres to the south of Balgo, educated younger generations.

"Our people used to live together, gathering for ceremonies and passing on the knowledge, the Dreaming Tjukurrpa," he said.



Elders paint a child in yellow and gold in preparation for a traditional celebration of dance and song. (ABC Kimberley: Jessica Hayes)

Warlayirti manager Poppy Leaver said the exhibition, Ngurra Kutjuwarra (On Country Together), was more than just vibrantly coloured works on a wall.

"It's completely part of themselves, it's part of their family, their story," Ms Leaver said.

"Everything's so interconnected and you feel that when you get out in country; people are weeping and crying and laughing.

"You've got old ladies who in the studio are crippled and shuffling around, and you get them out on country and all of a sudden they are running up sand dunes.

"It's just incredible for people's mind and spirit."



Elders enjoy a cup of tea at the arts centre while the latest piece is completed. (ABC Kimberley: Jessica Hayes)

John Carty, from the South Australian Museum, has a 20-year relationship with Balgo and surrounding communities.

"You can't underestimate the power of place and the importance of place underwriting the whole art world," Professor Carty said.

"It's a great signal to every arts organisation around the country not to lose sight of why you exist and who you exist for."

Warlayirti's artworks, including glass and jewellery, are highly collectable and paintings hang in galleries worldwide.

Operating a business in such an isolated area is not without its challenges, such as intermittent telecommunications, access roads cut for months by rain, and a population challenged by poverty.



Poppy Leaver says the paintings are a means of sharing knowledge. (ABC Kimberley: Vanessa Mills)

Ms Leaver said the art was a "two-way sharing" where the paintings kept country alive and passed knowledge on, while showing "whitefellas" a little of First Nations life and history.

"Painting is the only kind of culturally appropriate economic form in a lot of communities, where the vast majority of people are living off welfare," she said.

The UK-born art manager gestures to the Ngurra Kutjuwarra collection, many of which have red sold dots next to them already.

"They're just so special and beautiful and they mean incredible things – they sing," she said.

