THE PAST AND PRESENT ART OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINE

Susan Lerner

In 1971, in a government settlement near Alice Springs in central Australia, a small group of middle-aged Aborigine men began to produce paintings executed in acrylics on canvas. These men of the Pintupi, Anmatjera, Aranda, Walbiri and Luritja tribes were carrying on a tradition in their paintings that stretches back as long as 40,000 years in the stark and isolated regions of Australia’s central desert. Though the paintings were created in a contemporary medium, the compositions were essentially the same as traditional paintings executed over large areas of sand during tribal ceremonies, using crushed ochres, charcoal, feathers and down. Both are symbolic narratives of the journeys of the mythical creative ancestors of the Dreamtime—the time when all things on the earth were formed.

The Aborigines tell of the ancestors crossing a terrain without mountains or vegetation, water or sun, animal or man, and by their journeys and interactions with each other, creating what was lacking and imbuing each thing with their spirits.

The Supernatural Beings, or totemic ancestors, resembled creatures or plants, and were half human. They moved across the barren surface of the world. They traveled, hunted and fought, and changed the form of the land. In their journeys they created the landscape, the mountains, the rivers, the sandhills, the trees, waterholes and plains. They made the plants, the birds, the animals and all living things. They made the people themselves, who are the descendants of the Dreamtime ancestors. They made the ant, grasshopper, emu, eagle, crow, parrot, wallaby, kangaroo, lizard, snake, and all food plants. They made all the natural elements: the sun, moon and stars. Then weaned from all their activities, the mythical creatures sank back into the earth and returned to their state of sleep.1

These journeys are preserved in the culture by stories, ceremonies, symbols and patterns. Dreamtime is common to the culture of all the tribal groups of Australia.

Through his awareness of the ancient stories, each Aborigine man was linked to the landscape around him, for each man owned a “Dreaming.” A man conceived near the site of a particular mythological event was considered a descendant of that supernatural being and was related to all plants and animals associated with it. He was a custodian of the land-forms, which were considered to be metamorphosed beings. When he was initiated, taking his place as an adult male in the society, a man learned all of the associated rituals, song cycles and symbols that would bring his personal aspect of the long-ago creation into the present. This was his “dreaming.”
settlements and outlying cattle stations. From this dislocated, split world the contemporary painters have emerged.

The contemporary Aborigine paintings were seen for the first time in the United States in 1980, when the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California presented an exhibit, The Past and Present Art of the Australian Aborigine. In addition to an extensive display of stone tools, baskets, weapons, and symbolic and ceremonial objects, more than 40 contemporary paintings were shown, representing the work of 22 artists.

The largest painting, measuring 12 x 8 feet, is unique because it incorporated in its narrative many mythological sites covering an area near Alice Springs of about 1200 square miles. The sites, depicted in layers of dots, concentric circles and symbols that cover the entire surface of the canvas, describe ancestor trails, an ancestral woman digging for honey ants, food sites, and landmark rocks that are the metamorphosed remains of an unfortunate ancestor struck by lightning.

Other smaller paintings depict single sites, journeys, or ceremonies. "Possum ancestor," frequently the subject, is never literally depicted but is always represented by wavy lines. In Fire Story, his path moves across layers of patterns of red, yellow and white dots depicting sandhills and grass country, and the network of the brown dotted path of the carpet snake.

As exotic as the subject matter is, the paintings are unmistakably contemporary to the Western viewer, resisting assignment to "ethnographic art." Their abstractness minimizes the distinctions that would be made by a Western viewer confronted by realistic portrayals of a world so unfamiliar. Yet there is an underlying intelligence—a knowing—that is very clearly communicated. It is not the content of each artist's particular vision that is recognized, for the elements have no real symbolic value to us. What is being seen is the artist's clear comprehension of his universe, demonstrated in his painting.
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Man in ceremonial dress, Circa 1900. Collection of Sargon Tamimi.

In the traditional Aborigine culture, art functioned as work. In an environment where agriculture was inconceivable, domestication of animals impossible, the only action that a man could take to insure his survival was to know his world, clearly and completely. When he expressed himself in his painting, he was, in a sense, testing himself, challenging his knowledge and understanding. If he was successful, his community would survive.

In the traditional tribal environment, the ceremonial ground painting was part of a ritual that involved singing, dancing, bodypainting and adornment. These ceremonies brought clan and kinship groups together and graphically demonstrated the many levels of meaning that a design element, such as a concentric circle, could take on in a particular “dreaming.”

The men (most sacred ceremonies were reserved for initiated males) began by painting each other with the designs of the “dreaming” to be re-enacted. Paints made with red ochre, charcoal and white paste made from gypsum or pipe clay were applied in bands to greased areas of the body with the fingers, wrapping the body with design. The most important designs were expanded by adhering bird down, feathers or vegetable fluff. Often large areas of the body and face were covered with these materials.

Also adorned during these preparations were what was perhaps the most sacred object of the tribe, the Churinga. These flat slabs of wood or stone were the only objects preserved after the ceremonies, when they were hidden away in caves. Just as some of the ancestors were believed to have returned to their eternal sleep in landforms, some are believed to have metamorphosized into Churingas. These were incised and either rubbed with pigment, painted or left plain. Down and feather plumes were often added to very large Churingas which were then inserted into dancers’ headresses.
Ceremonial dancers with *Churingas*, Western desert, Circa 1900. Collection of Sargon Tamimi.

Finally, the fully adorned celebrants turned to making the sand painting itself. They began by hardening the ground with a paste of termite nest gravel and human blood. Then the patterns of concentric circles, dots, sinuous lines, tracks and paths were applied with pigments and down. Their fingers or a brush made from a chewed twig were the only tools. Landscape forms would also be built up in relief within the overall design-map being created. The size of the painting was determined by the mythological site being depicted. Some sand paintings, especially those created for initiation rites that recreated an entire myth cycle, were as large as several acres. Several men could work on a design at once, while the rest were singing the related song chants.

It is these sand paintings and the related body paintings that are the source of the contemporary works on canvas and board. What once existed concretely for only a few people during the actual ceremony has now been translated into a lasting form, for all to see.

The contemporary painting movement was given its initial impetus when Geoff Bardon, a schoolteacher at the government settlement at Papunya, encouraged several of the older Aboriginal men in the community to assist his students in painting murals on the school walls. This project soon developed into several murals, and then the interest began to spawn individual paintings.

The men of the painting group that developed at the Papunya settlement are from several different tribes. They still identify very strongly with their own personal homelands and paint the themes connected to these territories, specifically to their own "dreamings."

The diverse environments of spinifex grass, mulga and acacia, rock holes, salt lakes and sandhills, insect, animal and plant life are all represented in the traditional format, though now confined to a rectangular format canvas. The compositional
adaptation is remarkable when one considers that the conceptual relationships once portrayed over body surfaces, oval *Churingas* and large land areas have maintained their integrity within this new configuration.

The painters frequently work on a single canvas as a group, gathered around discussing the elements and conferring as to the most appropriate depictions of the chosen subject. Their memories are strong and it is largely memory they are painting from. For the older generation, the symbols have an actuality, but for the generation that follows them, the symbols will largely have lost that actuality. The ceremonies and stories may be recounted, but they will not be performed again. The contemporary paintings may well serve to strengthen the existing remnants of the culture, but to a large degree they are records, remarkably the first records of this kind we have of a 40,000 year old culture whose art, like its day-to-day life, was so inextricably linked to that ephemeral Dreamtime.

REFERENCE