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Summary of: “Painting Authenticity, Aboriginal art and knowledge in an intercultural space (Warmun, Western Australia)”

From September 2002 until January 2003 I conducted anthropological fieldwork in the community of Warmun in the East Kimberley (W.A.). The art centre was my main research setting. The thesis that I subsequently wrote, is contributed here.

As most Aboriginal art movements, the Warmun art movement has arisen from a local tradition and has become increasingly incorporated in a global art economy. Painting in Warmun started as part of a cultural revival movement in the mid-1970s, was ‘discovered’ by western art promoters in the early 1980s and, through exhibitions in museums and galleries, made known to a wider audience. The large interest in what came to be known as ‘Warmun art’ finally culminated in the establishment of Warmun Art Centre in 1998. The entanglement of the paintings in diverse areas outside Warmun community means that they have become intercultural objects. They provoke a dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous people about what Aboriginal culture is exactly and how it fits in the 21st century.

In my thesis I have especially wanted to make clear what happens when labels such as ‘authentic’, ‘traditional’, or, reversely, ‘inauthentic’, are applied to contemporary Aboriginal art.

Warmun artists consider their painting movement important for two main reasons: its use in the education of younger generations in local knowledge, and in forming exchange relationships with non-Aboriginal people. To acknowledge that these two functions have the same weight and cannot exist apart from each other, I have given them equal attention.

I have followed both individual artists and their works as well as their encounters with the western world of art galleries. Particularly exciting is how artists communicate the concept of the Dreaming to western audiences, thus challenging notions of Aboriginal culture as static and ancient. By incorporating modern elements in their paintings they bring forth an understanding of Aboriginal culture as dynamic and fully participant of the 21st century. Yet, the question is: when will the West, and especially the dominant art market, be ready for this?

Chapter One: ***Aboriginal art in cities***. Main setting: A Sydney exhibition of and symposium about East Kimberley art. The challenge of cross-cultural communication.

Chapter Two: ***Painting country in Warmun***. How come Warmun paintings into existence, how are they related to the Dreaming and identity of the artist, and how are modern elements incorporated in existing Dreaming stories.

Chapter Three: ***Teaching authenticity through art***. The dynamics of local knowledge through the lens of socialization through art. Innovations in painting styles and the expansion of knowledge.

Chapter Four: ***Aboriginal art in a global landscape***. The marketing of Warmun art. How different conceptualisations of ‘authentic Aboriginal art’ are in conflict.

Painting Authenticity

Aboriginal art and knowledge in an intercultural space
(Warmun, Western Australia)



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The artists on the cover is my Gija mother Betty Carrington, painting her country Texas Downs.



Charlene Carrington - Mistake Creek
© Warmun Art Centre

This painting is about Mistake Creek. Somewhere in the 1920s my ancestors were shot and burnt here by mistake. They were women and children and they were having a picnic near a big boab tree. They were cooking the kangaroo they had caught. The manager from the old Warmun post office thought they were cooking the cow he was missing. He had them wind up around the tree and shot by two Aboriginal stockmen from the south. Then they burnt the bodies. Not long after, his cow came back.

Charlene Carrington (26)

Black and white are in one now, must live together.

Betty Carrington (59)

If we do not forgive, Juwarri, the evil spirit, will enter us.

Hector Jandany (80)

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Introduction

Research questions and ethnographical approach

This thesis is about paintings produced by Warmun artists and the consequences of their entanglement in a global art market. It is not what I initially intended to conduct a study about. I went to Australia, in early September 2002, to conduct fieldwork research in the area of Aboriginal education. In the course of my research my attention shifted to the production of artworks. I had planned to study the integration of local knowledge about flora and fauna in an Aboriginal school and how this would come to represent 'culture'. This seemed to be an interesting topic in the context of self-determination. It would, as I expected, mirror the dynamic struggle of Aborigines with majority groups in society to claim culture and to restructure power relations. Yet, when I found a school, in a remote Aboriginal community in the East Kimberley, where I was welcome to conduct research, it appeared that local knowledge was only a marginal part of the curriculum. Since I did not want to abandon my interest in this topic, I decided to move my research to the community's art centre. Here, local knowledge was applied to canvas five days a week.

Ergo, my approach of local knowledge shifted to art. In order not to deviate too much from my initial research question I wanted to focus on how Warmun artists use their paintings to communicate local knowledge and cultural identity to the young generation. Although this topic remained a substantial part of my research, I soon realized that it gave too narrow a view of what these paintings really were: intercultural objects. Warmun art is produced for the market and I had to take this into account in my analysis. The time that anthropologists who studied art were predominantly concerned with the uses of objects in traditional, supposedly unchanging societies, has past (MacClancy 1997: 3). Indigenous art has entered the 'global arena' and its meanings cannot be reduced to the local.

The main theoretical problem I am concerned with is how 'culture making' happens through art. In this approach I have been inspired by Myers, who in his latest work *Painting Culture* (2002) follows the Pintupi art movement of central Australia from its beginnings in the 1970s to the international recognition it has gained now. What Myers makes clear is that there are several discursive levels involved in the social

constructions of the paintings (2002: 23). These range from 'indigenous accountings to those of governmental policies, art dealers, and art critics' (ibid.). Indigenous artists may stress that their paintings are 'stories', while art critics may see them as visually innovative. Yet others may value them for their 'exoticism'. We can therefore not apply one meaning to them, nor can we perceive the categories attributed to them as fixed. Aboriginal artists are involved in a dialogue with non-Aborigines about the meanings of their paintings.

One of the issues that are most prevalent in this dialogue is whether Aboriginal art that is painted for the market can be called 'authentic'. From a western art tradition perspective, that has historically valued indigenous art for its 'otherness', indigenous art that is produced with non-traditional materials and for a western audience is seen as inauthentic. However, artists themselves claim that their works are authentic. This aspect intrigued me very much. The Gija artists I spent time with emphasised that what they painted was *truth*, that their stories were not made up, as they came from the Dreaming, and they were concerned that people might not understand this. When after my fieldwork I encountered people who were outsiders of Gija culture, I was always asked the same question: 'Is this art still traditional? It cannot be spiritual since it is made for sale, can it?' These ideas reveal much of our limited concepts of 'culture', 'tradition', and 'authenticity'. In my view Aboriginal art had the abilities to challenge static notions.

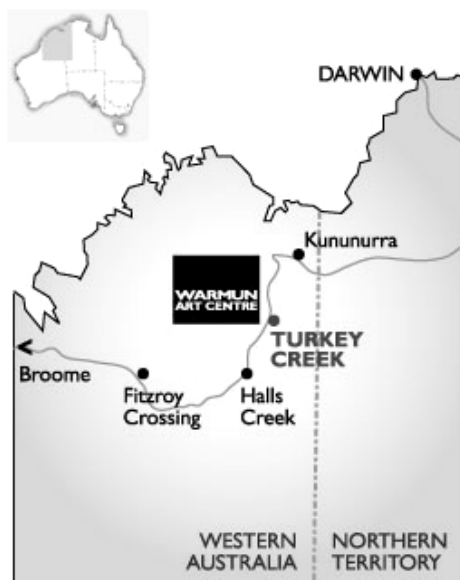
In writing my thesis I have focussed on the meaning of authenticity from an Aboriginal perspective, and how this is reflected in Warmun art. Other important questions concern the representation of Warmun art in the west. What image is given of Aboriginal art and culture in non-Aboriginal places, such as art galleries? What effects have the demands of the tourist market on Aboriginal artists and their works? What is the role of the non-Aboriginal people in the promotion of Warmun art? These questions all survey how 'authenticity' is expressed in different art contexts. They enclose the meanings attributed to indigenous knowledge as well as the continuing debate about the nature of this knowledge.

In writing my thesis I have thus chosen to cast light on the several processes Warmun artists and their artworks are involved in – from first production to their entrance in the

non-Aboriginal art domain. Such an approach, especially when used in the limited space of a thesis, has at times prevented me from delving deeply into matters that deserve more attention, such as the rich symbolic meanings of the paintings. Although local meanings are an important part of my thesis it has been my aim to place the Warmun art movement in a wider context. It is in the intercultural domain where meanings are negotiated, where cultures mediate, and where conventions can be transformed (Myers 2002: 351). Culture then is understood as something that is not set, but constantly in change. It is made in social action.

My ethnographical approach resembles Geertz's (1973) 'thick description'. Thick description is an interpretive approach that does not turn 'culture' into a thing, but recognizes that categories and conventions are not the causes of action, but its medium. It is in everyday contexts that the anthropologist gains insight in the actors involved in 'culture making' and in their motives. Following Moore (1987) I have treated my fieldwork as 'current history'. Social reality is fluid and indeterminate and what the anthropologist may observe at a certain time may not be valid for the future. Especially in the symbolic world of Aboriginal art, where meanings are constantly negotiated, there are no set standards.

Research setting



Warmun Aboriginal community (also called Turkey Creek) is situated in the heart of the remote East Kimberley, alongside the highway that connects the towns Kununurra and Halls Creek, which are both at a distance of over 200 kilometres from Warmun. The country in between is characterized by rugged hills and savannah grasslands that can flood during the wet season, but that is most of the year extremely dry. The only signs of human occupation are the several outstations¹ that have

¹ Outstations are small settlements, also called 'homeland centres,' that have been established by families in their traditional country. They enable people to live among the people of their own kin, to protect and

been established here over the past two decennia, and a few cattle stations. Most Aboriginal people in Warmun and the surrounding outstations are members of the Gija language group that has traditionally occupied the area in the triangle Kununurra – Fitzroy Crossing – Halls Creek. Since some knowledge of their history is necessary to understand contemporary processes in Warmun, such as the painting movement, I will give a short overview.

Aboriginal residence in Gija country has been relatively stable. Before the arrival of the first European settlers in the 1880's the people in this area lived in descent groups with affiliations to particular stretches of land, and access to the land and resources of other descent groups, which allowed considerable mobility (Ross 1989: 11). Religious life and philosophy, codes of behaviour and relationships among people derived from the affiliation with land and the mythology associated with it. When the English conquered the area from 1886 onwards, initially searching for gold, later for pastoral lands, this had severe consequences for the independent lives of the East Kimberley Aborigines. They attempted to defeat the *gadiya*, white people, mainly through small attacks and the spearing of introduced cattle, but these actions led to widespread reprisals, usually massacres. It is estimated that about half of the Aboriginal people of the East Kimberley were murdered in the first fifty years of European colonisation (Ryan 1993: 40). The people who survived were recruited as workers for roadside businesses and cattle stations, and since the latter often coincided with their own lands, Aboriginal families settled on the stations, joining relatives and working as stockmen and housemaids. Outside working hours they enjoyed considerable freedom and were able to maintain much of their traditional life, such as hunting for bush food and performing ceremonies (see Ross 1989; Ryan 2001).

The 'station period' came to an end with the introduction of the Pastoral Award in 1969. The Whitlam government had launched this Act to mitigate inequalities in the treatment of Aboriginal people. It obliged farmers to pay equal wages to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stockmen. Since Aborigines had until then worked for food rations, farmers did no longer want to maintain Aboriginal labour and forced families to leave (Ross 1989: 50). Most families found shelter at the fringes of Wyndham, Halls Creek

visit their sacred sites, and to gain a general feeling of well-being through contact with their country (Ross 1989: 71).

and Kununurra, far from their homelands. However, due to the initiative of some politically strong Gija members a track of land in Gija country was retained in the mid-1970s. This was Turkey Creek, once the site of a post office and ration depot, that had been used as a 'holiday camp' in the time that the Gija worked at the stations (Ross 1989: 56). At this piece of Crown Land the Warmun community was established.

Today the Warmun community counts about 400 inhabitants who live in five distinct 'camps' that are based on affiliation with relatives and shared former residence at the stations. Most Gija families have an agreement with station owners to visit their traditional land on a regular basis. The community consists of a school (from pre-primary to year 10), a clinic, administration office, recreation centre, gym, mechanical workshop, community centre, childcare centre, and (since 1998) art centre. While most institutions, such as the school, clinic and art centre, are managed by Euro-Australians, the community aims to be self-determined and is administered by a community council that mainly consists of elders.

Methodology

My fieldwork research has been based on the method of participant observation, which means that I took part as much as possible in the activities of the people I lived with. Spradley (1980:3) has called ethnography '*learning from people*'. The aim is 'to understand another way of life from the native point of view' (ibid.). More than anything else, I have experienced my time in the field as a personal process of learning. I started as an outsider to Gija culture, often felt terribly white, went through doubts and uncertainties, but while time evolved I mingled in more. When after four months I took the plane to Sydney and found myself at a corner of Eddy Avenue, shaking with the sight of the traffic passing by, I realized how profound living in Warmun had been.

In Warmun I lived in one of the teachers houses, just outside the community. The advantage of this house was that I could withdraw whenever I wanted to work on my field notes. During the day I spent much time in the community. I volunteered both in the school and the art centre, but the latter became the main setting for my research. By volunteering I became accepted sooner and it felt better as I did not have to walk around idly. I prepared canvas boards for the artists, wrapped up the paintings that were sold, crushed up ochres they used for their paint, and handed out tea and water. Gradually I

learned the social codes needed for interaction. In the beginning when I talked to artists I often only got a smile or a hum for an answer, but this changed when I learned to speak their language, in the broadest sense of the word. I learned to communicate differently, less direct and abstract, and mixed in some Gija words that I had picked up, which always caused hilarious laughter. I also noticed the importance of body contact: holding hands, a quick caress, and sometimes a hug. It started to become common to embrace the older female painters when we met in the morning.² Some of the artists liked to hold my hand when I talked with them. Joking was an important part of our relationship.

My position amongst the Gija was one of a 'novice'. 'You must learn,' is what people often told me, treating me in the same way as young Gija people. It was out of the question that I could just ask anything, and they expected from me that I was patient. I resigned myself to this, and spent a lot of time just sitting with the artists and waiting until they told me something. There were certain things they liked to talk with me about, and these directed me in my research. They *did* like to talk with me about their country, its sacredness, their own history in it, as well as that of their ancestors. Some of them took me to their country, which I felt as a great privilege and which was also essential to understand their paintings. Real acceptance came when I was given a skin name, *Nambin*, which meant that my totem was that of the black-headed snake and that I had responsibilities towards the people I was now related to. Betty Carrington, a wonderful artist with whom I often sat down, became my 'mother', which strengthened the tie I had already felt with her.

Limitations of fieldwork

The perfect fieldwork research probably does not exist. There are limits to what a particular fieldworker can and cannot learn in a given setting (Van Maanen 1988: 4). When my fieldwork ended after four months I desperately wondered how I could ever write a thesis based on such a short period. As a matter of fact, the more time I had spent in the field the more questions arose and the more I realized how much I did not

² Christine Watson has drawn attention to the importance of touching in Aboriginal culture. The skin links individuals to human relatives, ancestors, ceremony and land. It is a vessel for considerable emotion (1999: 167).

know. Also there were many people whom I wanted to talk to, but I did not get the chance.

My research has been largely based on informal talks with elders. I would have liked to include opinions of young artists in my thesis, but this was difficult. Most young people were shy to talk to me or felt like they were not allowed to talk about certain (religious) matters. This was due to the social structure of Warmun society, where elders are respected as authorities in religious matters. My informants were about fifteen artists, both men and women, who regularly painted at Warmun Art Centre. Almost all of them were above the age of fifty. With some of them I was very close, others I only spoke occasionally. I have not recorded our conversations since this would create the distance I wanted to avoid. However, I made notes during or just after our talks and worked these out the same day. Since I did not only spend time at the art centre but also in the community, the school, and several outstations, I was able to place the painting activities in a wider context. Encounters with non-Aboriginal people who are involved in the world of Aboriginal art, like the art coordinators in Warmun and people I met during a symposium of Warmun art in Sydney, have been helpful in understanding different opinions about Warmun paintings.

Structure of the thesis

In the first chapter of this thesis I concern myself with the way Aboriginal art is exhibited in museums and art galleries. The representation of Aboriginal culture through art – how culture is made in these areas – is the main topic. After providing a historical overview of the attitudes towards Aboriginal art in the museum world, I will turn to a recent exhibition of and symposium about East Kimberley art in Sydney. The way the paintings were displayed, the cross-cultural communication during the symposium, and the different interpretations given to the paintings, are paid attention to in this chapter.

The second and third chapter are situated in Warmun and concern local meaning giving to art. In chapter two I describe how Warmun paintings come into existence, and how they are understood by their makers. The way they are related to the Dreaming and identity of the artists come to the fore, as well as their aesthetics and story content. By describing how new elements are incorporated in paintings, I aim to give an

understanding of ‘authenticity’ from an Aboriginal viewpoint. In chapter three I continue the discussion about the dynamics of local knowledge, but now through the lens of socialization through art. I describe how young people in Warmun gain understanding of their identity through the act of painting, and how the apprenticeship system in Warmun works. Innovations in painting styles and the expanding of knowledge are important topics.

Finally, in chapter four I place Warmun art in a global context. The marketing of the paintings is the main topic of this chapter. I illuminate the ideas and activities of the Warmun art coordinators whose responsibility it is to meet the needs of artists as well as to make the art centre commercially remunerative. The need to conform to the tastes of western consumers has its consequences for the kind of paintings Warmun artists can produce. Here, different conceptualisations of ‘authentic Aboriginal art’ are in conflict, as I will show.

1. Aboriginal art in cities

We wanted to make people understand what it's all about, this painting. That painting make them remember. (Peggy Patrick, 2003)

On the 10th of January 2003 I walked through Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens on my way to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. With me I had an invitation for the opening of the exhibition 'Our True Stories, art of the East Kimberley'. It had been a week since I had left Warmun, in the East Kimberley, where I had conducted fieldwork at the local art centre, and I was curious about the way the paintings were exhibited in this urban setting. Sydney and Warmun were worlds of difference. Walking through the green, well maintained park landscape that is surrounded by massive 19th century buildings and the dizzy skyscrapers that emerged in the last decades, the East Kimberley landscape, more than 4000 kilometres to the northwest, seemed to be of a striking timelessness. That country of rugged sand and limestone hills, of eucalypt woodlands and spacious savannah grasslands out of which arise enormous boab trees, has not changed much over the last 100.000 years. The life of its occupants, the Gija, has altered significantly however, with the arrival of the first European settlers in 1895 (Ross 1989: 21). Still, despite years of suppression and government attempts to assimilate them into European culture, the Gija retained much of their culture and are using new means to give expression to the close relationship they have with their country. Moreover, these expressions are not limited to a place in their own community, but end up all over the world. With their art, the Gija make ties to other parts in the world, connecting Warmun to Sydney for example, and thereby exchanging knowledge with people and places that are different from them.

Exhibitions of Aboriginal and other non-western art can be complex, in the sense that galleries and art museums are institutions that have arisen from western notions of art. They attract an audience that is usually not familiar with the backgrounds of non-western art, so that the matter of translation is a serious one. The way art is exhibited, and culture is represented, depends on many factors (see Myers 1998). In this chapter I will go into the representation of Aboriginal culture by art. It will become clear that in the past, exhibitions of Aboriginal art have been either too much focussed on 'tradition' and 'authenticity', in that way excluding more contemporary forms of Aboriginal art, or, where contemporary art was included in exhibitions, they focussed too much on the

‘modernity’ of the art, without providing a cultural and historical context. In both instances, there is not enough understanding given about the continuing nature of Aboriginal art. At the Sydney exhibition on the other hand, an attempt was made to show contemporary paintings while placing them in their context, so that the connection between culture and art was made more understandable and less presented as ‘fixed’.

Placing contemporary Aboriginal art

Myers (1995, 1998) has studied the circulation of contemporary Aboriginal art (in his case acrylic paintings), both within and outside Australia. He has indicated the problems that come up when people are confronted with this art in galleries and art museums that do not provide much information about its origins. His account of one man’s reaction at an exhibition in Paris (1998: 31, 32) illustrates that people often do not know how to look at contemporary Aboriginal art:

This man made it clear that he did not like the show or the paintings. He didn’t know *what* they were: ‘Are they art? Myth?’ He didn’t ‘know the truth of it, the authenticity’ – what they really were. (...) This man complained that the paintings were situated as if they were modern art – without explanation.

Myers’ example shows that contemporary Aboriginal art confuses people, as they do not know how to place it. At the Paris exhibition, people spent most of their time in the area where Tiwi mortuary poles and bark paintings from Arnhem Land were exhibited. In the section of the acrylic paintings they clustered around the books and the explanatory texts, but did not look much at the paintings. As Myers explains, the visitors of this exhibition dichotomised the two sections: they saw the barks and the mortuary poles as ‘traditional’ in contrast to what they saw as the ‘modern’ acrylics (ibid. 30). They also viewed the first as ‘authentic’ in contrast to the latter. As they were not provided with a framework to place the contemporary paintings in a historical context, they remained puzzled about its source. These opinions of what is ‘authentic’ and what is not, are western conceptualisations. They proceed from an ideology that sees cultures, especially non-western cultures, as bounded, as ‘uncontaminated by external influences’ (Coleman 2001: 386). Therefore, Aboriginal paintings that are produced on canvas (a non-indigenous material) and are made for the market, confuse

people who are not familiar with the historical background of this art, and with its continuing function in Aboriginal communities.

Displaying Aboriginal paintings as ‘art’

Why had the organizers of this exhibition in Paris chosen for a form in which not much information about the paintings was directly provided? This had in fact to do with what may be called ‘political correctness’, as a reaction to a museum history of neo-colonial, ethnocentric thinking. In the past, objects made by Aborigines were valued only insofar as they were seen as ‘authentic’, in the sense of antique and untainted, the product of a static, ‘primitive’ culture in which designs were handed down intact, unchanged over generations (Isaacs 1999: 9). These objects ended up in ethnographical museums. In 1912 the ethnographer Baldwin Spencer exhibited bark paintings he had collected in Arnhem Land, and called his exhibition ‘The Primitive Art of Australian Aborigines’. In doing so, he applied the term ‘art’ to objects that had previously been seen as artefacts or items for trade (ibid). This ‘primitive art’ stayed inside the anthropological, museological domain for decades, until in 1958 the Art Gallery of New South Wales began to exhibit collections from Yirrkala and Melville and Bathurst Islands (Morphy 1998: 29). Initially new art forms, that used new materials or new ideas, were still viewed as unauthentic (influenced by the West) and did not get much attention until 1971, when an art movement emerged in Papunya. There, huge sand paintings and constructions that served as a ‘set’ for spectacular nighttime performances (ibid: 11) were the inspiration for the new painting on boards. The Papunya artists showed their individual creativity while elaborating on their own cosmological framework. Many exhibitions in major American and European museums and galleries followed during the 1970s. In other Aboriginal communities people also started to paint on board and the new art form slowly started to get recognition from the public, who discovered the creativity and poetic imagination of the paintings, whether they were painted on board or on bark. From 1988 onwards many international art museums started to acquire Aboriginal paintings and presented this art as mainstream contemporary art (see Isaacs 1999). Aboriginal art was seen as contributing ‘something important’ – something different or challenging – to the world of art (Myers 1995: 66).

The entrance of Aboriginal paintings into the world of galleries and art museums, led to a way of displaying that fits in these locations: the paintings are hung at eye level on white walls, with next to it a small label mentioning the name of the painter, the date, and title. An ethnographic gaze, with its focus on myth and narrative, is often relinquished in these places, as this would once again prevent people from seeing the paintings as modern art. Many art critics have developed an antipathy towards anthropologists, as they see their approach as too scientific, too much focussed on understanding instead of on the beauty of art (ibid. 1998: 20). Therefore, contemporary Aboriginal art had to be displayed like other art, giving centrality to the artwork and not to its context. In this way the viewer is stimulated to undergo a one-to-one experience with the artwork, without being influenced by a text. This compartmentalization of experience from information may be politically correct in the sense that it equalizes Aboriginal art to other art, but it does not lead to more understanding. As Myers indicated, the viewers of the acrylic paintings in Paris understood that the paintings were art as they were exhibited in that way, but they were baffled about the source (ibid. 33). It is evident that when one views art that springs from one's own culture, it is much easier to undergo an experience with it. Consequently, contemporary Aboriginal art can only be fully understood and appreciated if the viewer has some knowledge of the background it emerges from. It is not enough to present Aboriginal paintings as contemporary art. Some commentators even regard this as ethnocentric, as the focus on the aesthetics of the paintings reproduces western notions of art (ibid: 23). In this view, both the traditional way of exhibiting Aboriginal art in ethnographic museums and the newer way, which aims to place Aboriginal art on an equal footing with other art, and focuses on its visuality, have its limits. Ethnographic museums have since long, for a large part due to their purpose (the conservation of objects), given the image of non-western cultures and peoples as 'temporally and geographically distant, exotic others' (Kahn 2000: 57). Thus, the museum history of Aboriginal culture shows it as traditional and bounded. By exhibiting Aboriginal art in galleries and art museums, the people involved have tried to change this image into one that showed Aboriginal culture as dynamic, as part of a living tradition. These intentions were well-meant, but when these exhibitions had a modernist design, they rushed into the other extreme: a lack of information, of context, does not clarify the meaning of these paintings and their

historical continuation. In both instances, it is apparent that these kinds of exhibitions are shaped around the western concepts 'art' and 'culture'. However, an understanding of the 'art' and 'culture' of Aborigines can only be obtained if we transcend these concepts, and look at the intentions Aborigines themselves have by presenting their culture through paintings. At the exhibition 'Our True Stories' in Sydney, an attempt was made to involve Gija artists in explaining their paintings to a western audience.

The exhibition 'Our True Stories'

As mentioned above, on the 10th of January 2003 I visited the opening of the exhibition 'Our True Stories' in Sydney. As I knew the artists and their art it felt somewhat odd to see them in this different setting. On those white walls the paintings seemed a bit out of place, even though that was their wished-for destiny. City people, most of them white and wealthy, walked past the paintings, sometimes stopping to study one of them closer, or to read the texts that revealed part of the painting's meanings (see Figure 1).

Art from the East Kimberley has appeared on many exhibitions during the last decade, but the exhibition 'True Stories' was significant in two ways: it featured art from the East Kimberley solely and did that in an extensive way - 80 paintings, sculptures and works on paper from circa 1976 to the present were exhibited; and its aim was to provide an insight into the historical and contemporary context of this art, among other things by organizing a symposium. Seven artists had come over from the Kimberley and were, to some extent, involved in both the opening and the symposium. In this way the organizers of the exhibition tried to set off a dialogue between 'the public' and the artists, aiming to empower the latter to control the meanings that were attributed to their paintings. This last point is very important as, as Myers (1995: 59) has indicated in relation to the representation of Aboriginal art, there is a gap 'between how the producers account for their paintings and what significance they are made to have in other venues'.

The contrasts between the artists and the public were remarkable in many respects, but the exhibition was certainly an attempt to understand each other better. The artists by 'being there', in that big city which they experienced as 'too crowded', by meeting 'whitefella' and explaining their art to them. The white people by listening to the artists

and asking them questions. Although those questions were often wide of the mark, as I will show, they revealed an attempt to comprehend the art in a non-western way.

The name of the exhibition

As I have explained above, the outward appearance of an exhibition, its presentation, is significant in getting an understanding of how organizers want their subject to be viewed by the public. In addition to the display of the paintings, I have included the exhibition's name and the way the opening took place, in my analysis of the appearance of 'Our True Stories'.

The name of an exhibition is a representation per se. For example, in 1989 the exhibition 'Magiciens de la Terre' was held in France. It featured cultural objects from all continents, with an emphasis on ground paintings. The aim of the curator of this exhibition was to show the universality of the creative act, especially in the search for a common, transhistorical experience of spirituality (Myers 1998: 23). Its name, 'magicians of the earth', can therefore be seen as an indicator of both the contents of this exhibition, and the ideology behind it. It appears that the name 'Our True Stories' was motivated by a remark of Gija artist Paddy Bedford, one of the artists whose work was showed. He had said that he had been inspired by the 'true stories... from the olden days' (Art Gallery of New South Wales 2003). What is meant by those 'true stories'? The press report of the art gallery (ibid.) stated that these are

the ancestral stories (...) that explain the creation of the landscape, such as the scattering of the giant barramundi's scales that became the Argyle diamonds. Intertwined with these stories are the layers of recent history – the massacres and dispersals of Aboriginal people, the pastoral and mining exploration of their land.

Thus both the ancestral stories, which come from the Dreamtime, and the stories of recent history, which are marked by the tragic encounter with white people, are given the status 'true' by the organizers. Bearing in mind the ongoing struggle of Aboriginal people for both acknowledgment and apologies for the wrongdoings of the past and recognition of their continuing customary laws, beliefs and traditions (see ATSIC 1999), the exhibition may well be intended as a contribution towards the nation's reconciliation with the Aboriginal population. Commentators on the exhibition seemed

to comprehend the paintings in a confronting way. One critic described them as works with a 'sharp edge' (Sydney City Search 2003):

Don't expect familiar themes of Aboriginal painting. No gentle depictions of daily routines of the kind that win admiring glances from tourists passing through Alice Springs. No, these works have a sharper edge. They're about massacres, rape, violence, stolen children and loss of birthright.

In other words: the works can be, and are probably meant to be, confronting for those people who are largely unaware of the cruelties that happened to Aborigines in the past and that were legitimised by the governments of the time. Also, the '*our*' in 'Our True Stories' suggests that it is the artists themselves who determine the meanings of the paintings, whereupon the curator follows. This is affirmed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales that says to have sought guidance and permission from the artists and elders of the East Kimberley (Art Gallery of New South Wales 2003). Of course there remains a difficulty here, as artists usually do not control the display of their paintings in the world of museums and galleries. Therefore curators bear a great responsibility to give an adequate representation. How was this done in the Art Gallery of New South Wales? In what way were the paintings exhibited?

The display of the paintings

There was a slight difference with exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art as described above. In Sydney, the paintings were put on the walls in a traditional art museum way, ordered by artist, but instead of giving limited information (title, artist, date) the story of each painting was rendered in a written text next to it. These stories were based on the information the artists had provided about their paintings. Hence, the paintings retained (some of) their local meanings while they were put down in a western setting. Therefore, the sense of dislocation, the cultural incongruity, may have been less strong here than it was in Paris, for example. The focus was not exclusively on the aesthetics of the paintings, but also on the context they emerged from. This context was even made more visible by a video documentary in the exhibition space. In the documentary the artists were showed while they were painting and during trips in their country. The documentary attested to the great involvement of the artists in the exhibition, since they had chosen this medium. They had rejected the idea of a catalogue, as, according to Edmund Capon (the director of the art gallery): 'They

wanted to talk themselves, for the kids and all Australians.’ Considering that most of them are illiterate, this medium provided the artists an opportunity to present themselves in their own way. The strength of the documentary was also that it actually showed the background of the paintings: the country that is the sheer inspiration for painting.

The exhibition’s opening

Finally I will deal with the opening of the exhibition. Openings, as a first meeting of the public with something new, something different, are revealing in that many parties are present and are usually given the chance to say something about the exhibition, which can give an insight into the many voices involved in an exhibition. They also tell something about equality and difference, especially when minority people are represented. Do these have the opportunity to give expression to *their* perspective on the exhibition? Miriam Kahn (2000: 59) speaks in this respect about ‘suppression of the dominant academic voice in favour of the expression of individual community members’ perspectives’. There certainly is a need for these local expressions as there has been all too long a biased approach in the representation of others. During the opening of ‘Our True Stories’ many different voices were represented. The people who spoke were people from the art world, a representative from Lake Argyle Diamond Mine (a major sponsor of the exhibition), and Warmun artist Peggy Patrick. The latter emphasised the importance of retaining cultural tradition:

We don’t want kids who smoke and drink in our community. That grog is a real problem now. We need that painting, we need song, dance, ceremony, to hold on to our culture.

The three female artists – Goody Barrett, Lena Nyadbi and Peggy Patrick – performed a *manthe*, a welcoming ceremony. In so doing they transferred an important local practice to the western world of art. As they involved the public in their ceremony, they, as a minority, were ‘in power’ – it was a very direct way of confronting their western public with their culture and worldview. As Peggy Patrick said:

This is what we do. This is how we welcome the people to the country. We welcome you now and bless you.

The smoke that is part of the ceremony, bearing a strong smell of gum leaves, was spread out to embrace all watching people. The three women on the platform started



Figure 1. The display of East Kimberley art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.



Figure 2. East Kimberley artists posing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

singing, using their clapsticks to accompany their voices. The ‘naturalness’ of the performance was striking. The women did not seem to mind the different setting; they performed in exactly the same way as they did at home, with their own people. It was as if they had taken their country with them. They had been invited to come to ‘Sydney country’, but at the same time they invited the people in Sydney to their country, welcoming and blessing them. Their country was there, embodied in their paintings. It was the ceremony through which they made this clear.

The symposium ‘Our true Stories’

So far it appears that in the exhibition ‘Our True Stories’ not only the visible features of the paintings were given importance, but the context from which they emerged as well. Therefore, the exhibition can be seen as a convergence between an ethnographic and an art exhibition. But the organizers had gone a step further, in that there was not a sole curatorial authority. The artists were involved in the exhibition, in that their stories were to some extent presented with the paintings, their voices were heard in the video documentary, and in that they were given the opportunity to perform their own ceremony in opening the exhibition. Still, because of the limitations of a temporary exhibition, the impossibility to give a comprehensive image of Gija art and its origins, it was decided to connect a symposium to the exhibition. This was held on the day after the opening and accessible to anyone interested. The symposium revealed the many voices involved in the representation of Aboriginal art and the difficult interaction between artists and audience.

Different cultural realms

The symposium ‘Our True Stories’ was held in the gallery’s auditorium, which has a sloping floor, so that the podium (where the artists and other participants were seated) was down below. As a consequence the artists sat right in the ‘spotlights’. Even though they were flattered at all the attention they got, they felt uncomfortable in this unfamiliar setting, as they told me. In Aboriginal society it is considered impolite to speak up for oneself, to attract all attention, especially on public occasions of speaking. Myers (1986: 121) has called this emotion ‘shame’ or ‘embarrassment’. As Myers points out, older Pintupi men habitually begin their speeches with forms by

downplaying their contribution, thus indicating that they do not think they are better than others. Likewise, they avoid direct confrontation lest it should cause 'shame' by exposing a person's egotism (ibid.). I believe that Myers' analysis of Pintupi's interpersonal acting is also largely applicable to the social acting of Gija people. The artists' cultural background placed them in a disadvantaged position, as they had to move into a cultural realm (western, academic) where interpersonal acting is characterized by outwardness, directness, and individual attitudes. Due to these contrasting social values, some artists found it difficult to talk. Another problem was that a large part of the audience, those who were not familiar with Aboriginal English, could not understand the Aboriginal speakers. Repeatedly, the woman next to me asked me to translate the artists. As a consequence, the question rises whether it was possible to have a genuine dialogue at the symposium.

The participants of the symposium – the speakers - consisted of the seven Gija artists, two researchers (Kim Barber and Eric Kjellgren) and the director of an art centre in Kununurra (Kevin Kelly). Another researcher, professor Marcia Langton (who is of Aboriginal descent) from the University of Melbourne, could not come, but her speech had been recorded and was displayed on screen. Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins chaired the panel discussion. It appeared that the 'academics' were there as a kind of culture translators. The focus was on the artists and their art, but as it was difficult for the artists to express themselves in the language of their audience, the academics took that role on them. They were invited on behalf of their status as experts in Gija art and culture, a status that was recognized by the artists as well. I will now go into the meanings that were attributed to Gija art by the participants of the symposium.

Interpretations of Gija art

Artist Paddy Bedford's opening words expressed the importance of 'country' and kinship in Gija culture. Pointing at the painting projected at the large screen behind him, he said: 'That true story for my father. He told me everything. He bin showin' me all that country.' After this, the film 'True Stories' was introduced by Edmund Capon, the director of the art gallery, who emphasised the reconciling value of Gija art:

Through the art a wonderful legacy has been created for all Australians. These are the true stories that can be kept for future generations. (...) True Stories is particularly timely. Dialogues about the true history continue. This exhibition is one step closer to understanding each other.

Marcia Langton, the next speaker, put across the cruel history, the damage that was caused to the Gija people by the white. According to her, one has to be conscious of the interconnectedness of the historical and spiritual dimension of the paintings. She also stressed that 'white people should realise that the spirits Aboriginal people talk about are real spirits.' After her, artists Freddie Timms and Patrick Mung Mung spoke about pastoral life and the meaning of painting in their lives. Freddie Timms talked about the job he used to have as a stockman, and how he was taught to paint by the elders in his community. He established an art centre in Kununurra: 'That business really strong for us.' Patrick Mung Mung, who was instrumental in establishing the art centre in Warmun, talked about the importance of painting and country for the young people in his community:

We all Gija people, we all work together. If we all work together, that might change something. I've seen lots of things happen. Things might work for the young people. I take them out into the country. Teach them about country. Learn them to work and learn them little bit English. If old people work with young people, that might give bit of change.

Kevin Kelly, the director of Red Rock Arts in Kununurra, gave an overview of the development of East Kimberley art. He signified three important aspects of painting: the act of painting; cross-cultural learning; and the historical importance. The first aspect concerns the significance painting has for the painters themselves; the second and third aspects have to do with the worth of the paintings in the intercultural domain. In that last domain, through the paintings, non-Aboriginal people can develop an understanding of Gija culture and can learn about the colonial and post-colonial history of the East Kimberley. Regarding the impact of the painting upon the artists, he underlined the issue of self-esteem: 'The best things the artists have gained by it cannot be expressed in material forms. The people got a job and thereby gain self-esteem. They walk the street with their head up.'

The next speaker, Kevin Kjellgren, a curator of the Metropolitan Museum in New York who did research in Warmun and Kununurra, emphasised the transcultural nature of the paintings. He mentioned the cross-cultural misunderstandings that can come into existence, as the values the art world attributes to the paintings are often very different from those of the artists.

The three female artists, Peggy Patrick, Goody Barrett and Lena Nyadbi, were invited to talk about their past and contemporary lives. Goody and Lena obviously found it very difficult to talk in front of the large audience, so that Peggy Patrick (who is used to performing in cities) took over the talking. She told about the importance of painting for remembering the past:

We wanted to make people understand what it's all about this painting. That painting make them remember. (...) We wanna make people come together, make them think about how bad history was.

Peggy illustrated that bad history by talking about the stolen generation: 'They can't find their parents back. They can't find their country.'

Kim Barber, an investigator of Aboriginal land tenure in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, told about his work in land claims, and how paintings are used to provide evidence. He mentioned the continuous meanings in the paintings:

Despite changes in the landscape, like roads and buildings, the paintings remain the eternal features. The geographic-spiritual characteristics do not change. (...) People learn this material over 40, 50, 60 years. They learn the topographical information, but also the political basis. It is the senior artists, who are the Law people, who pass this knowledge on.

After the lectures, the discussion between participants and audience was started. This was an interesting part of the symposium as it revealed the different contexts from which the audience and the artists spoke. One of the questions was about whether the artists were inspired by western art, such as the art of Picasso. The artists did not understand this question, and the other panel members tried to explain it to them. Finally, Paddy Bedford made clear that the question as it was posed had no relevance to the artists: 'There is acrylic painting and ochre. First I painted with acryl, then I went back to ochre.' It is very presumable that the artists had never even heard of Pablo Picasso (Picasso is most likely to have been inspired by Aboriginal art instead of the other way round). A question like this shows that people when looking at Aboriginal art use their own cultural perspectives and it is difficult to transcend those perspectives. Another question indicated that people found it difficult to address the artists directly. A woman asked Hetti Perkins what the land does mean to her, referring to what Perkins had mentioned at the start of the symposium about her involvement with the Gija women who had showed her their country. Hetti Perkins immediately transferred this

question to the artists, saying that it was much more interesting to hear their stories. That was after all the intention of this symposium.

There was one question that evoked many reactions from the side of the artists, signifying that they considered it to be an important question. Someone asked if and how children were educated in their own culture, and whether they were at risk of losing it. Three artists gave their opinion on this matter. Patrick Mung Mung and Peggy Patrick emphasised the importance of learning in a traditional way, by the Law:

I take my grandkids into the bush, show them the country. My grandson does his own corroborree with Betty and Winnie. That's how they learn.

School... when they small, four, five, we teach them singing, dancing, painting. When they grow up, bigger, they go to their Law. When holiday finished, go back to school. They got two schools: white and blackfella. Kids have to go through Law, every time Christmas time. That don't stop.

Hector Jandany told about his involvement with the bicultural school in Warmun, and showed his concern over the continuation of knowledge from the Dreamtime:

I was in school. Tell'm all my dreamtime, all my area. (...) Make that Warmun big school. Today right up. These young people now, they'll be lost. (...) They might do something. They might do all right, they might be lost. Not many care for meeting anymore. We used to come for meeting, I was learning that way. I'm here today, keep following.

The spiritual and the political

'Keep following' was Hector's message referring to the tracks of the ancestors, who created the land and the moral order, and whose essence is still in the landscape. Hector spoke about the young people whom he wanted to follow those ancestral paths. But he did not speak in front of the young people in his community; he spoke to an audience of white people that had grown up with a different worldview. 'I'm here today' is what Hector said. He and the other artists had not come to Sydney just to show their paintings, they also had an important message to tell. They wanted to give those city people an understanding of the importance of their country. By telling their history, they told about the pain caused by losing their country. By showing their concern for the young people, they pointed out that their country is of continuing significance. Several times they talked about the danger of young people who will be lost if they lose the

connection with their ancestors. By telling their city audience, they asked recognition of their relationship with the land, which is the basis of their identity.

The paintings made by the Gija are much more than landscape paintings – they represent the creative forces that animate the country, and they represent their maker's identity. The symposium in Sydney tried to make this clear. The paintings can also be seen as political statements in the sense that they draw attention to the postcolonial history, when the country was taken away from the Gija. Most of their country has not been returned to them yet. In her opening address Peggy Patrick had referred to Lake Argyle Diamond Mine on Gija land. The land is owned and exploited by the mining company, but Peggy Patrick mentioned that the Gija are the real owners. She even said: 'We own the mine.' Another artist, who was not present at the exhibition, had told me back in Warmun: 'It is important to get people to recognize what the land really means to us. We've got traditional ties to that country.'

Transcending contexts

Although some artists found it difficult to talk during the symposium, the symposium seems to have been successful in its aim to build a bridge between two different cultures. The artists were given the opportunity to tell the stories behind the paintings in their own words. The explanations of the scientists present were supplementing; they did not deviate very much from the meanings given by the artists. All interpretations encircled the historical importance of the paintings, so that people could know about what happened to the Gija in the past, the spiritual dimension of the paintings, and the continuation of knowledge through them. In contrast to the scientists, the artists did not refer directly to the political aspect of the paintings and the issue of self-esteem, but these matters were visible in their acting.

The dialogue with the audience shed light on the fact that the world Gija people live in is very different from that of their white, city audience, and that it is hard to transcend one's own context. Still, the attempt was made in Sydney to inform a wider public about how to understand this visual expression of culture. Whether the exhibition itself could do this as well, remains to be seen. To understand the stories provided with the paintings, one needs some background knowledge. The solution for this was found in

the making of a video documentary, so that the country the paintings emerge from was made visible, and the voices of the painters heard.

Concluding note

The exhibition 'Our True Stories' seems to be a precursor in that it exhibited contemporary Aboriginal art in a gallery mode, while placing the paintings in a contextual framework. By involving artists in the representation, the local meanings were included. Therefore, this exhibition made clear that Aboriginal art is a category on its own. The country, with its ancestral powers, is the sheer inspiration for this art. As Isaacs (1999: 13) states it:

The power that emanates from the design is what Aboriginal artists regard as the essential quality of the work, deriving from the spiritual beings themselves. So, when Aboriginal people from a traditional background enter exhibition halls where such paintings are hung, their response is directly related to the power or immanence of the design.

It is evident that Aboriginal people look at their paintings in a way that we are not used to. Their paintings are expressions of a deep connection with their country and the ancestors that created it. These expressions are not new, but have found a new way in which to emerge. Because of this new way, it has been possible to propagate their spiritual beliefs to places outside their own community. But in the wider cultural arena in which the paintings end up, the meanings attributed to them often differ from the meanings given to them by the artists. I will continue this discussion in chapter four. For now, the local meanings will be given centrality. Therefore, the next two chapters will be situated in Warmun, where Gija people use their paintings to transmit knowledge to younger generations.

2. Painting country in Warmun

The aim of this and the following chapter is to describe the *local* meanings of Warmun art. However, by using the term ‘local’ I am encountering a conceptual problem, as ‘the local’ in the sense of something that is ‘internally homogenous and externally distinctive and bounded’ (Wolf 1997: 6) does not exist. Anthropological research has long been focussed on the study of ‘microcosms,’ treating societies as holistic and bounded systems – a vision ignoring that the world of humankind constitutes a ‘totality of interconnected processes’ (ibid: 3). It has left us faced with artificial concepts, like ‘culture’, ‘society’ and ‘the local’, and by using them we have to be cautious not to reinforce false impressions of internal cohesion and boundedness. Thus, I am using the term ‘local’ here in the sense of what I have observed in a certain place (Warmun), at a certain moment in time, but in my analyses I have taken into account the processes that are beyond the local level and beyond the period in which I conducted my fieldwork.

In the world of contemporary Aboriginal art the interconnectedness between different places, organizations, people and ideas is evident. In the previous chapter I have already mentioned that Aboriginal art did not exist as art before the western art world showed an interest in objects that were previously used for internal, ceremonial uses. By promoting the development and commercialisation of these painted objects, Aboriginal art became popular in a very short time. Its present entanglement in the world of art dealers, art coordinators, galleries, critics and tourists implicates that it is impossible to restrict the meanings and functions of art to the local interpretations and purposes. Fred Myers (2002: 23) calls the acrylic dot paintings that he has studied since the 1970s, exactly for this reason ‘intercultural objects’:

Their social biography begins in the Aboriginal communities where they are manufactured, but their production is not so simply rendered. (...) Try as one might to specify the “local,” the ethnographer finds that there are no *innocent* accountings of these objects. To describe the paintings as “traditional,” “transitional,” “authentic,” “based on ritual knowledge,” or as representing a different ontology, involves distinctive stakes and values in the worlds in which the art circulates.

The same can be said of the ochre paintings that are made in Warmun. Many meanings are attributed to the paintings, depending on the viewer’s perspective. The paintings have what Myers calls a ‘hybrid status’ (ibid.): they are made out of largely introduced

materials, yet are claimed by producers to be authentic. This seemingly contradictory characteristic is probably what makes contemporary Aboriginal art so confusing for many. Idealised and romanticised notions of Aboriginal culture as ‘unspoilt by Western civilisation’ (Weichart 2000: 144) are still prevalent. That is why Aboriginal art is so often expected to be ‘traditional’ and ‘pure’.

Warmun art is, like other contemporary Aboriginal art, neither totally ‘authentic’ nor ‘a simple product of external authorities’ (Myers 2002: 21). But as its producers claim it to be authentic, it is important to understand what this ‘authenticity’ means in the local conceptualisation. This may demand a revision of our conceptualisation of authentic as something that is ‘traditional’ and ‘locally bounded’, as Elizabeth Coleman (2001) has suggested.

The rise of a painting movement

Painting on board is a relatively new activity amongst the Gija. It has its origins in the mid-1970s, when the Gija returned from the fringes of Kununurra, Halls Creek and Wyndham to their traditional country and established Warmun. To strengthen community life cultural activities, such as the performance of ceremonies, were resumed in this period. New ceremonies were found, of which the *Gurirr Gurirr*, a song cycle dreamt by Rover Thomas, is the most famous one. It expresses the journey his classificatory mother made after she died in a car accident (see Christensen 1993; Caruana 1993: 163-168). In the performance of the *corroborree*³ painted boards that depicted the places she visited in her journey were carried by the dancers. This use of ceremonial objects is common to the region (Christensen 1993: 33). It is the first known example of painted boards used in Warmun. The Gija shared the *Gurirr Gurirr* with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in numerous places (Maningrida, Victoria River Downs, Perth). Through this corroboree outsiders of Gija culture became aware of the Warmun paintings that celebrated the profound relationship with the land (ibid.).

Another incentive to produce paintings was the establishment of a local school in Warmun. Before, children went to school in Wyndham and Kununurra, where they also lived most of the year. To prevent more loss of language and culture the inhabitants of

³ A *corroborree* is a Kriol word used by Gija people to refer to a ceremonial tradition composed of myth, associated ritual, dances and song verses.

Warmun lobbied successfully for a two-way community school.⁴ Elders were involved in the teaching and used paintings to accompany their story telling in Gija language. The paintings were displayed in the classroom and thus served to surround children with visible symbols of their culture (Ryan 1993: 43). Increasingly elders learned (by watching others) the technique of painting.

Painting in Warmun thus has a communal basis – both the ceremonial Gurirr Gurirr boards and the paintings used in the school functioned as methods to revive Gija culture and to bond community members. When Mary Macha, a representative of an Aboriginal art company in Perth, visited Warmun in 1980 the paintings got a new function - making money and gaining acknowledgement of non-Aborigines for Gija culture - and became more individualized. Yet, despite the commercialisation of the Warmun art movement, the paintings are still deeply rooted in Gija culture, as will become clear in this chapter.

The birth of a painting

An outsider to Aboriginal art will not understand much of its meanings as we saw in the previous chapter. Most paintings are easily recognized as ‘landscapes’, but it is hard to grasp what they really symbolize. When I first visited Warmun Art Centre I was just as unaware of their ‘invisible architecture’ (Bähr 2000: 58) as most non-Aboriginal people. I could see however that the artists enjoyed what they were doing. They worked outside, either underneath the art centre’s house, which contained the art gallery and the living space of the art coordinators (see Chapter Four), or beside a large barn, where they could also sit in the shade of a roof. Some of them sat on the ground, while others preferred a chair. There were both men and women, ranging in age from the very young to the very old. Children ran around the place and a few young women held babies while they were painting.

It was a wonderful experience to sit beside artists and observe the creation of their paintings. Most artists took their time to paint, sometimes chatting with each other, but always concentrated and with joy at what they were doing. The painting process is more important than the final product, as will become clear.

⁴ A two-way school is a bicultural school. It has as its aim to incorporate local (indigenous) knowledge in the school program and to involve community members in the education.

One morning I was sitting next to Mabel Juli, who is a senior artist and a strong 'Law and Culture-woman' in Warmun. Like all the other artists, she had her own spot. Every morning she placed herself at a table at the edge of the workspace, where she overlooked the hills in the distance, and commenced painting. 'Can you crush up some of that brown and that red?' she asked me that specific morning. 'Make'm nice brown colour.' A feature of Warmun art is that ochre is used as painting medium. This is also called 'bush paint' by the artists, who say that it makes their paintings strong, like the country. Once in a while the art coordinators take the artists for a trip to surrounding country, where they dig up and collect the ochre. There are four basic colours of ochre in the East Kimberley: brown, red, yellow and white. In its natural state the ochre is claylike material of varying hardness. The pigment stays true when crushed and mixed.

I looked into the tins put in the middle of the workroom and chose a piece of brown and a piece of red ochre. I put them into a stone bowl, got the grinder and started crushing. When I had crushed a large amount, I sifted it into a small plastic bin, and continued crushing up the remains. Most artists liked their ochres very fine, although there were some who preferred a rougher texture for their paintings. While I was crushing, Mabel turned to me and said: 'I need black. Do you want to crush up some charcoal? You got enough of that brown now. Leave it.' As there is no black ochre, the artists use charcoal to make black paint. Mabel then put a bit of glue and water in the tins with the crushed ochre and charcoal and mixed it, so that she was ready to start painting.

A large canvas board, 140 x 100 cm, which was already coated with white paint, lay in front of her. With a pencil, Mabel began to make a sketch. She then stopped for a while, leaned backward and said with a frown: 'I've got to *think*!' As I understood it, she was busy creating a mental image of what the painting should look like. After a few minutes she continued sketching and then started painting, while saying: 'Make'm real good!' She used different brushes that were standing in a bucket next to her. First she filled in the background with a light brown colour. She then started to improve the sketch consisting of a mountainous shape, with a half-moon and two stars around it. She used green, brown, black and white colours. While painting, she told me where she wanted to put which colours and what the painting symbolized. It represented Springvale Country, her mother's country, where she grew up (130 kilometres to the



Figure 3. Mabel Juli painting Springvale Country.



Figure 4. Nora Nagarra painting Dana Station.

south of Warmun). 'I can feel my country in my *djaan* (heart),' she said. Now and then she softly sang some words in Gija.

Mabel pointed to the moon and the stars in her painting and indicated that this was her Dreaming: *Karngin Ngarrangkarni*. Her painting told the story of *Karngin*, the moon that was a man in the Dreamtime. Mabel sang the words that remembered him. She told me the following about her painting:

That *Karngin*, moon man, him fell in love with a girl, *Darwool*, snake woman. But she was wrong skin for him, mother-in-law. But *Karngin* wanted to marry her. People told him he should marry one of *Darwool*'s daughters, *nyawana*. That his promised girl. He was angry with them and walked away, to the top of a hill. There he said to them: 'You mob will all die, but I will come back alive.' He turned into the moon. That two promised ones, *nyawana*, turned into *wardul*, the evening and morning stars.

Nowadays, the full moon is a reminder to all Gija people to respect the rules 'right way marriage,' as Mabel explained. Thus, this painting expresses the kinship rules that have been established in the Dreamtime and that determine how people should relate to each other.

Mabel finished at noon and, together with some other artists, she was taken home by Rudy. She returned the next morning to finish her painting. The final addition was the applying of dots around the components of the painting. After that, the painting was left to dry and then photographed by Rudy with a digital camera. Caroline went to Mabel to write down the story behind the painting. A number was put on its back and it was then taken upstairs, to the art centre's gallery. In the following days one of the art coordinators would feed its data and photo into the computer and put it on the art centre's website, where people, whether they lived in Australia, Europe or the United States, could buy it and have it sent to them.

Claiming authenticity

This history of a painting, born in the mind of an Aboriginal woman and ending up somewhere on a wall in, perhaps, Berlin or Washington, is fascinating and evokes many questions. One issue has surrounded Aboriginal art since its emergence in the western world and has become only more significant in the contemporary time, and that is 'authenticity'. Elizabeth Coleman has described how in an Australian television documentary Aboriginal paintings produced for the market were qualified as

‘inauthentic’ (2001: 385). The most important claims for this qualification were that the paintings were considered as ‘not spiritually motivated’ and that they were produced with non-traditional materials. Also Aboriginal paintings produced by non-Aborigines or by someone else than the person that signed them were judged as fakes. These suppositions are challenged by Aboriginal groups, who claim that works that are perceived as inauthentic from a western perspective are in fact authentic (ibid.). Clearly, these viewpoints proceed from different ontological theories. In the West we tend to compare authenticity with something traditional and unchanged, something untouched by external influences. This conceptualisation creates a myth similar to the idea of cultures as static and bounded societies.

Instead of labelling Aboriginal paintings as authentic or inauthentic, we need to understand them from the perspective of their makers. As Myers has said: before one can engage with the visual form, it is necessary to understand the ontology that lies outside the paintings (2002: 20). Then we will also come to understand why the process of painting is more important than the finished product, and why modern elements can be part of paintings without threatening their ‘Aboriginality’.

The Dreaming: space-time, Law, identification

Mabel’s painting of Springvale Country would not have been authentic in the eyes of the documentary makers. First of all, it was produced for the market, and secondly it was painted on canvas board, a non-traditional material. Mabel also used brushes, glue and plastic tins – all imported materials. She drank black tea, dressed in cotton clothes, spoke English, and enjoyed playing card games. One thing was sure: she did not live the same kind of life as her ancestors used to do before white people built cattle stations on their country. Yet, something had not changed and that was the belief in *Ngarrangkarni*, the Dreaming. Mabel’s paintings originated from her belief in the Dreaming and her connection to country. That was what made them authentic, or, in her own words, ‘true’.

In anthropological literature much has been written about the Dreaming (or Dreamtime) and what is always stressed is that it is not just about a sacred heroic time of long ago, but that it involves something that is timeless, eternal (see for example Stanner 1979). Many non-Aboriginal people are appealed to the ‘myths’ that belong to the Dreaming, and that explain how human beings and nature got their current shape.

Mabel's story of *Karngin*, as symbolized by her painting, is such a creation story. However, these stories alone are not enough to obtain a right understanding of the Dreaming, and may (unintendedly) give a rather static impression of the Dreaming.

Although the Dreaming does refer to an ancestral past, a creative epoch during which the formless was given form, it does not stop there. The ancestral past denotes the era when ancestral beings rose up from beneath the earth to travel the land and give shape to it. They created its topographical features, sang the names of plants and animals in the languages of the people who would take guardianship of the land, instituted the rules for life (the Law), invented songs, dances and paintings that commemorated their acts, and created the human beings who would succeed them (Morphy 1998: 72). When their work was ended they returned to their place of emergence, certain sites in the land, where they still are and participate in the becoming of things. The Dreaming is thus as much part of the past as it is of the present and the future.

Because human beings were created by the ancestral beings they are part of the Dreaming. They literally arise from it. Amongst the Gija the Rainbow Serpent is the most important ancestral being. As a carrier of fertility it curved out the rivers and pools and placed 'spirit-children' in some of them. These spirit-children incarnate in human beings. When their material body dies they will return to the pools they emerge from. Before they enter the womb of a woman they are temporarily incarnated in some kind of animal that lives close to the waterhole. This animal is called the *djerin*, the conception totem of the child. The *djerin* usually presents itself to the father, and occasionally to the mother, in a dream (see Kaberry 1939: 42). The child will always be associated with this animal as well as with the place his or her spirit emerges from.

The Dreaming *is* and will always be according to the Gija. It may be compared with our Big Bang-theory, as Morphy (1998: 76) also suggests. Just like the Big Bang was there suddenly and contained the 'soup of life' so did the world according to the Dreaming ontology come into existence from a formless substance. In both instances life evolves out of a common source and becomes more complex, either through evolution or through the acts of the ancestors. And similar to scientist's hypothesis that the universe is still expanding, the Dreaming has never been perceived as 'finished'. The forces that materialized the world are still alive and present, even though roads nowadays run through Gija country and airplanes fly over it. Also akin to scientist's

recent discoveries in quantum physics,⁵ Aboriginal people have always regarded all things as interconnected. It is from this belief that totemism, the connection between human beings and animal species (ibid.), originates.

Storing knowledge in paintings

Let us go back to Mabel and her painting. There are many features in Mabel's creation of *Karngin Ngarrangkarni* that can give us an understanding of the belief in the ongoing nature of the Dreaming and how this is expressed through the activity of painting. I will begin with the motive for painting certain content matter. Why did Mabel paint Springvale country and the *Karngin* Dreaming?

Warmun artists' subjects spring from their relationship to the land, which was established in the Dreaming. The Gija belong to the territory that was shaped by the ancestral beings of their language group. But within this large area there are particular places, called *country* by the Gija, with which individuals identify strongly. These are the places where the forefathers of one's mother and father used to live and take care of. Springvale country is the traditional *country* of Mabel's mother. In Gija it is called 'Darragyn' but most people use the English name, after the cattle station that was established here (and where the original owners of this country worked in post-settlement times). Mabel has inherited her mother's right to Springvale and is allowed to paint it. She also inherited Dreaming stories from her mother that belong to this place. Mabel, as 'owner' or 'boss' of her country (see Chapter Three) has the responsibility to look after it and to pass on the knowledge that belongs to this place.

Mabel mentioned that she could feel her country in her heart. The reason is that her spirit emerges from a sacred waterhole in Springvale. The connection people have with certain places in their country is thus very intimate. Patrick Mung Mung once told me how much he loved his country and how strong he sensed his relatedness to the waterhole where his spirit used to reside:

When I go far away, water becomes dirty. When I come close, water becomes clear. I went away to Darwin and water became dirty, but when I came back to the water I could see it clear up, right in the middle. Fish was coming up to me.

⁵ Quantum physicists discovered how an individual electron influenced another quantum particle instantaneously over any distance despite there being no exchange of force or energy. This led to the conclusion that matter could no longer be considered separate.

The relationship is mutual, or in Morphy's words: 'the one can act on the other' (1995: 198). Patrick made clear how important it was for him to care for this place. When he left it to go to Darwin, he could not take care of it anymore, and the water became turbid. When he returned, the connection was re-established, which was symbolised by the clearing up of the water and the emergence of the fish that is his conception totem. These spirit places are perceived by the Gija as places where they can replenish their energy.

One's country is thus a vessel for considerate emotion. Emotions do not only arise out of the sensed connectedness to one's spirit place, but also out of the history that is part of it. Especially the older artists have memories of the time when they lived in their country, working at cattle stations, and in the weekends hunting for bush food. Such memories are 'stored' in paintings. Also accounts of the lives of one's forefathers are often part of the subject matter of Warmun art. For example, one of Mabel's paintings is in commemoration of a massacre in Springvale (Figure 1). The site where the massacre happened is represented by the top hill line. Mabel's uncle was the only one to escape by feigning his own death. He eventually ran away from the murderers and hid in the cave painted in the hill on the right hand side. The black circular shape is where Mabel's grandfather was killed. The bottom hill is the main hill in Springvale country.



Figure 5. Mabel Juli's painting Darragyn – Springvale Country
© Warmun Art Centre

Artists use their life experiences and the body of knowledge they have accumulated throughout the years for the stories they want to tell with their paintings. As knowledge is continuously evolving, the content matter of paintings is practically inexhaustible.

However, the paintings that are made for public use limit artists in revealing knowledge. Secret-sacred knowledge cannot be divulged, as this can harm both the painter and a non-initiated person. Reversely, the preferences of buyers for certain stories above others, also limit the artists (see Chapter Four).

Converting country to canvas

Before going on with the way in which artists experience the activity of painting, let us first have a look at the relation between form and content of Warmun art.

Warmun artists have converted their country to canvas. As mentioned, the Gija started to paint on boards in the mid-1970s, to reconnect to the country and Ngarrangkarni. The style they painted in emerged from an old tradition of rock painting in this area. These rock paintings depict the ancestors and their acts of creation in the places where they belong, whereas in contemporary paintings the spatial context is converted to canvas (Kjellgren 2002: 360). Warmun art has a distinctive style that is different from Aboriginal art in other areas in Australia. For example, whereas in Aboriginal art from Central Australia the country is represented from an aerial perspective, in Warmun the country is painted in profile view, as seen by a person standing on the ground (ibid.). Whereas in the desert hills are painted as flat circles, they are shown as conical shapes in Warmun (Ryan 1993: 40). Not surprisingly, the difference is due to the region's distinctive topographical features. In contrast to the flat desert areas, the East Kimberley topography is 'full of rocky protrusions, odd twisted hills and ample boab trees' (ibid.).

From a western art tradition perspective, Warmun paintings are not 'realistic' landscape paintings. The land is often painted from different perspectives or horizons. In many paintings a view from above, looking down on a waterhole for example, is combined with a side view of hills. The underlying ontology is decisive for the way paintings are structured. An exact depiction of the landscape is irrelevant, as, in Bähr's words: 'what matters is an interpretation of the essence of the link between man and the land' (2000: 58). Yet, most artists refer to them as 'maps'. For example, Patrick Mung Mung often used his paintings to tell me about the tracks he used to walk in his younger days:

I can see right through it. We used to walk through our country, you know. I know exactly where I am when I walk through my country. It's like a mental

map. But you have to watch the country very well. Some parts look like each other, so you have to think carefully about which sites you have passed to know where you are. You have to look to the marks.

Yet, paintings are not topographically accurate, but have to be understood as 'metaphysical maps' (see Morphy 1998: 103). However, artists who have a profound knowledge of the country will perceive them as both topographical and metaphysical.

All true stories

According to Kjellgren (1999: 227), most Warmun artists make a distinction between Dreaming narrative and events that have really happened, although 'historical' events and Dreaming descriptions can be integrated in one painting. From my own experiences with the Gija I have however come to conclude something else. The Dreaming is not seen as 'less real' than events that happen in daily life. The difference between Dreaming and 'normal life' is only made in the sense that they are different dimensions. This implies that people are involved in two existences, the one the mirror image of the other (Hume 2002: 50). The Dreaming is perceived as the world where the ancestors live, a world without fixed forms, where the dead go. When people walk in their country, they remember how the ancestral beings created it, but they also remember their deceased relatives, whose spirits returned to the country. Some of my informants told me that they occasionally meet a deceased parent or grandparent at a certain place, where they see this person as he or she was in real life. The ancestral beings, the creators of the landscape, are sometimes also seen in a specific form, but are more often perceived as a (life-giving) power.

Barbara Glowczewski has referred to the Dreaming as a 'live and unlimited programme – not just a stock of remembered models for organizing society' (1999: 6). She calls it a 'virtual memory' where present, past and future cohabit, and 'where people's biographical events are encompassed in the collective memory of the group but also of different species and elements, including trees, water, rocks and stars' (ibid.). Warmun paintings should be understood from this point of view. They are like 'memory containers' that reveal the interconnectedness between people and cosmos. As the Dreaming is everywhere and permeates time, all things, no matter when they happened, can be depicted in the same image.

Painting as portal to the Dreaming

In Aboriginal society, ceremony has always played an important role in accessing the realm of the Dreaming. During ceremonial performance, usually a combination of dance, music and painting, the acts of the ancestral beings are replicated. Performers come to embody the ancestral beings they represent by the way their body is painted, the words they sing and the way they move during the dance. They take over the identity of the ancestral being to which they relate and participate in their powers (Morphy 1998: 183). The excitement during such performances creates energies and emotions that enable people to experience the presence of ancestral spirits. The process of painting similarly releases people's awareness of the Dreaming.

Warmun artists spend hours in succession painting, which causes a slightly trance-like state. I mentioned how Mabel, before she began to paint, created a mental image of the painting, requiring her mind to move to her country, to see its features and to recall the events that happened there. 'I can feel my country,' she said. In a way, this feeling is to be interpreted literally, for the applying of paint to the canvas resembles touching the land or skin, as Christine Watson (1999) has pointed out for Balgo artists. While Warmun artists do not have a sand painting tradition such as exists in Balgo, touching is just as important. Most people in Warmun walk barefoot, open to sensory contact with the land. They also spend much time sitting and lying on the ground, feeling comfortable in unity with it. Painting on canvas may be compared with the painting of human bodies, aimed at imbuing people with ancestral powers. One of my informants told me how when she was sixteen, Law women rubbed red ochre on her body, after which she had to lie in the desert for several hours. She fell into a trance, during which she entered the ancestral world. The red ochre, which contained sacred qualities, as it was perceived as ancestral blood, had protected her against the sun and had helped her to reach a transformative state. The applying of ochres to canvas is also perceived as a transformative act. The canvas is literally permeated with the country's essence, as all ochres are collected in Gija country, and therefore in a sense comes to embody the country. Warmun artists are especially fond of white ochre, as its shininess resembles the vitality of the Dreaming.

Painting ancestral power – the story of the Butterfly

One morning at the art centre I was surprised and happy to see Hector Jandany. Hector is a strong spiritual leader and painter in Warmun. He is also one of the founders of the local school. Since he is now an elderly man who suffers health problems, he often retires to the community's pensioners' home. This morning he felt well and started a painting. He asked me if I wanted to watch him. He painted the Butterfly Dreaming, which is a Dreaming story that belongs to the Warmun region, Hector's birthplace. 'In Ngarrangkarni the butterfly carried all the water to the waterholes and rivers. Him waterman,' Hector told me. While painting, he softly murmured the song that belonged to this Dreaming, which made him feel in touch with it. In his painting Hector depicted only the figure of a butterfly; there was no landscape background, perhaps because the Butterfly Dreaming is connected to many places. While painting he made remarks like: 'He may fly away, go to creek!' pointing out the direction the butterfly might fly. In the last stage of the painting, he applied the white dots around the contours of the image, and told me: 'This will make him talk.' However, Hector was critical of his painting, telling me the painting made him sick, perhaps because in his eyes it did not reveal the Dreaming's power. Since Hector is quite old and his hands have become a bit shaky, he often criticizes his own paintings.

The applying of dots that made Hector's painting 'talk' is an essential component of a painting's power, which Myers has also mentioned in relation to Aboriginal art in general. According to him, the dots are motivated by an aesthetic interest in producing visual brilliance, which expresses the emanation of ancestral power (2002: 68). The aesthetics of a painting and its content matter are thus in close relationship. The ochres used by Gija artists also give the paintings the same warm colours and textures as the country contains.

Recent manifestations of the Dreaming and the partaking of whites in it

Although most Dreaming stories painted by Warmun artists recall the happenings of the creation era, several stories tell how ancestral beings have manifested themselves recently. Most interestingly, non-Aboriginal people are often involved in these stories. They make clear that the Gija perceive the Dreaming as a force to which *gadiya* are also subject. One day I was watching Patrick Mung Mung while he was painting on a large



Figure 6. Hector painting the Butterfly Dreaming.



Figure 7. Mabel's painting of Goolarbool and the photo camera.

canvas board. This senior artist possesses a quiet wisdom and usually does not talk much, but this day he told me about the immense power in the land. He told me about the danger *gadiya* people expose themselves to when they enter Aboriginal land without having been 'blessed' by the owners of the land. Such a blessing involves the watering of one's head from pools in the country. It serves to welcome newcomers to the ancestral beings so that they cannot harm you. The local water neutralizes difference; it makes a known person of one who was originally 'different' (Merlan 1998: 70). If one enters the country without being blessed, one poses oneself in a life-threatening danger. Patrick told me the following story about an old *gadiya* man whose car broke down in the heat of the day:

He had only one bottle of water, but he knew he was close to Winnabe Springs, so he started looking for it. He couldn't find it, walking and walking. He got lost, couldn't find his way to the road anymore. But the road was just on the other side of the hill, very close. He drank all his water, walking round and round for days. People found out he was missing and started looking for him. They found his car, but they couldn't find him. Then they asked blackfella people. They found him. He had died. That's what happens when people go into the country when they haven't had a welcome ceremony. Their minds go empty, they forget everything.

Patrick told me that it is the spirits who make people's mind empty, and that: 'Blackfella must do a little blessing for whitefella.' He told me more stories of white people who got lost in the country, and then revealed to me that not only people's minds go empty, but that something happens to the country as well:

You know, this is funny country. It changes. The hills can change to a different side. The spirits can change the landscape. Then you are hooked. You can't get out anymore.

These stories emphasize the autochthonous force in the country, to which people are subject. Often the Rainbow Serpent figures in them. As mentioned earlier, the Rainbow Serpent is considered one of the most powerful ancestral beings. He⁶ dwells in water but is connected to the sky. Because of his immense size, he is able to control earth and sky simultaneously. He is responsible for seasonal rain and supplies spirit-children. Without the Rainbow Serpent life would not be possible. It is thus important to keep in favour

⁶ In fact, the Rainbow Serpent is considered to be sometimes masculine and at other times feminine, but for convenience I will use the masculine form here.

with the Serpent. Many deaths from drowning in Gija country are attributed to *Goolarbool*'s anger.

There is a specific story, owned by Mabel, which reveals in a beautiful way how *Goolarbool* manifests himself to outsiders. Mabel had included it in one of her paintings, to warn *gadiya* (Figure 7). This painting of Springvale Country depicts a sacred waterhole in Springvale where *Goolarbool* lives. Mabel told me that a few years ago a *gadiya* girl was in big danger while visiting this place without having been blessed. 'You see that snake?' she asked me, pointing to an elongated figure in the painting:

Yeah, that rainbow snake from Ngarrangkarni. Shine was put on that snake. Here, see that shine? He put shine on because that girl was taking a photo of him. Shine came from that tree. He didn't like that girl taking photo. He was angry. He could even have grabbed that girl. That's why we've got to welcome people.

Mabel then told me that the photo the girl took was at the art centre's office. 'You can see nothing on that photo, only shine.' The rainbow serpent is often associated with gleaming objects, with pearl shell, and even with semen, suggesting the fertility and regeneration he is responsible for (Merlan 1998: 69).

These stories give us a specific understanding of 'place' in the Aboriginal conceptualisation. As Merlan writes, in anthropology '*place*' is no longer acceptably conceptualised as a passive, abstract, or homogenous arena in which things happen or a mere backdrop behind social structures. It must be understood processually and experientially, as a dynamic dimension of social process (ibid: 211). In other words, people constantly interpret new events in the context of what is already known. The Dreaming is the permanent factor in life, and everything that will happen now and in the future is related to it. New knowledge can therefore be incorporated in it (see also Chapter Three). Hence, there is not a static reservoir of Dreaming stories.

Mabel thought it very important to record this story and sell it with the painting. Regrettably this was not done, an aspect I will return to in Chapter Four. Mabel's story made clear that the Dreaming continues and that photo cameras and *gadiya* can be a part of it just as traditional spears and ancestral beings.

Concluding note

What I have wanted to make clear in this chapter is that a western ideology of 'authenticity' should not be applied to Aboriginal art. Warmun paintings are not made within a completely inherited local style and technique and for a strictly ritual consumption (Coleman 2001: 386), yet they are authentic from a local perspective as they derive from the Dreaming and the artist's connection with country. They are commodities, and still highly spiritual. I have also tried to explain that the Dreaming is experienced as a continuous power that exists in the world of today. New elements can therefore be included in Dreaming stories as the Dreaming permeates everything, and new content matter can be constantly stored in paintings.

The elders in Warmun often told me that without knowing their country they would be lost, 'like a *gadiya*'. They would literally be lost in space. Paintings function as 'memory containers', to stimulate one's memory about the country's topography and history. They are multilayered mediums of knowledge transmission - they encompass the ancestral acts of creation, together with more recent histories and practical knowledge of the country, showing the interconnectedness between all things and the artist's personal connection to them.

One of the biggest concerns of (senior) artists has not been mentioned here and that is the continuation of Dreaming knowledge. Many elders in Warmun are highly concerned about their grandchildren's future and often express worries that these children 'will be lost' if they forget their place in country. They try to get children to paint as this forces them to think about their country's metaphysical topography. The next chapter will be about this topic: how young people learn to paint their country and about the new forms this generates. The processual nature of knowledge will be explained, whereby I will make clear how the Dreaming functions as a dynamic structure in the daily life of the Gija.

3. Teaching authenticity through art

In the previous chapter I have explained the ontology of the Dreaming and how art emerges from it. In this chapter I will concern myself with how this ontology is learned. As we know, people are not born with ‘culture’ – they are socialized in a specific orientation towards the world. Much of this socialization happens rather unconsciously, that is: it is ‘taken for granted’. The way we communicate, the food we eat, our attitude towards gender, and towards family, friends, nature and animals. Other knowledge is gained more explicitly. While in western society much knowledge (like scientific knowledge) is formalized in schools and stored in books, in Aboriginal society (where writing did not exist before European colonization) knowledge is traditionally made concrete through other means. Expressive means such as dances, songs, story telling and painting have always been essential to pass on information. These have a pre-described structure, so that they can be easily remembered.

There are phenomenologists who state that Aborigines, like other hunter-gatherers, experience the world by dwelling in it, and that the activity of hunting and gathering defines the experience of place (see Myers 2000: 77). Such statements overlook the fact that people are always taught how to relate to their environment. Although I am convinced that one will feel more in touch with nature when dwelling in it, one learns the meanings that are applied to it from others. There is always ‘learned interpretation’ involved in our experience of the world around us. We may perceive a rock as a vast substance, a result of the sedimentation during an ice age, or we may perceive it as a materialization of an ancestral being, formed in a mythical pre-time. Both ways of looking are socially constructed.

In this chapter I am concerned with how Warmun art is used to pass on knowledge about the land from generation to generation. Socialization through Aboriginal art is not a topic that has been written about much, so far. I know of two studies that have appeared in this field. In *Ancestral Connections* (1991) Howard Morphy describes how the Yolngu of Northeast Arnhem Land use their art for cultural survival. With their bark paintings they reproduce the inner structure of society, while they also reflect the changes in their society through time. Luke Taylor’s *Seeing the Inside* (1996) is situated in Western Arnhem Land where the Kunwinjku bark painting movement is organized in

networks of related artists. Senior artists teach younger artists the designs they can use when representing the power of the ancestral beings. Like among the Yolngu, there is much individual creativity in painting, while the religious key principles of society are maintained. In both societies, the traditional gerontocratic structure in learning about religious matters is retained in the painting movement: young people rely on the older generation in learning to paint, and in deserving the right to depict stories. Both studies are excellent accounts of the continuing religious and social roles of Aboriginal art, despite its production for the market. However, individual young artists are not followed very closely in their learning process, which is why these studies remain quite abstract at this point.

Concerning Warmun art the limited amount of material that has been published about it has been focussed on single artists (see Ryan 1993: 43). The disregard of the communal basis of the art movement is peculiar as the art movement rises out of an educational function and as Warmun artists constantly stress the importance of their paintings for young people to learn about. Although painting on board was ‘invented’ much later in Warmun than it was in Arnhem Land, where bark painting already existed centuries before Europeans set foot on the Australian continent, Warmun art is integrated in the local knowledge system. Similar to Yolngu, Kunwinjku, and probably to most contemporary Aboriginal art, paintings have a double function, being produced for both the market and for local purposes. The commercial demand for paintings has been beneficial to Warmun, with its high level of unemployment. Young people are given the opportunity to engage themselves in their culture and make a living out of it. In the education of children, paintings are used to refer to the country and to make children conscious of their identity. New styles are constantly being developed by individual artists, but these innovations are in line with the local concept of ‘authenticity’ as will become clear. First, I will introduce the context in which painting in Warmun takes place.

Warmun versus Kununurra

Charlene, a 25 year old woman of Gija descent, looked up from her painting and smiled at me. I had seen her the previous day with two of her five children; today she had left two of them in the care of her husband, while the other two were at school. Her baby lay

quietly on the plaid next to her. The art coordinators had mentioned Charlene as a promising, young artist with a strong desire to experiment. 'My grandfather and my father taught me to paint', she told me. 'I like to mix both their styles in my painting.' She pointed out the places in her painting that belonged to her father's and her grandfather's country. I asked her if she would teach her children to paint as well, some time in the future. 'Yeah, I'd like my children to learn to paint', she said, 'Sometimes I give them paper to paint on. They can practice.'

Charlene is a 'third generation artist' in Warmun. Her grandfather, Hector Jandany, was one of the first 'board painters' in Warmun, back in 1979. If Charlene succeeds in teaching her children to paint as well, the family tradition will be continued. The emergence of young artists is an outstanding feature of the Warmun art movement. In nearby Kununurra for example, young people are often reluctant to paint. According to Kevin Kelly, the director of Red Rock Art in Kununurra, Warmun may be a better environment for young artists: 'In Kununurra there is some stimulation at the schools to get young people into the arts, but the schools are very white. The staff consists only of white people. The methods they use probably don't suit Aboriginal people.' This seemed right. Kununurra is a 'city environment' where Aboriginal people live on the margins of society. In the early 1960's the sacred sites of the local *Miriwoong* were destroyed by the Ord River irrigation scheme and the flooding of the Ord River to form Lake Argyle (Ryan 1993: 40). They were forced to move into Kununurra township, built on their territory, where an Aboriginal reserve was established. There, access to land was replaced by access to alcohol.

The Gija have a similar 'displacement history', but are more fortunate in having had the opportunity to move back to their original country, whose sacred sites are largely intact. Life in Warmun, and especially in the surrounding outstations, is more linked to 'traditional ways' than it is in Kununurra. People have opportunities to visit their country, to go hunting and gathering, and to perform their ceremonies at important Dreaming places. Elders are welcome to teach in the local school. It cannot be denied that alcohol is also a problem in Warmun, but people have to drive two hours to buy it in Kununurra, which is why drinking is usually limited to the weekends. Warmun's remoteness in combination with the strong appeal of elders towards young people to

follow the Law and their involvement in the local school, seems to make it a better environment for young people to learn 'traditional ways'.

Local knowledge in change

Warmun's remoteness has not prevented the influx of external ideas, products and knowledge to the community. To a certain amount this had led to some fragmentation of knowledge and desires between the generations. Occasionally, I witnessed conflicts between a grandparent and a grandchild. Elders often complained to me about young people. They said things such as: 'The young people should care for the old people;' 'They do stupid things now, they don't follow Law any more. They drink, play cards, use bad words.' There was an overall anxiety for the destiny of the younger generations. Mabel called the kids in Warmun 'rubbish' since they do not speak Gija anymore. Hector complained about their food habits. Today's elders grew up very different from the way young people do nowadays. When they were young they lived with their family in small camps. Although their territory had been confiscated by cattle stations, they could maintain much of their pre-settlement lifestyle. They did not go to school, but accompanied the women on their daily foraging trips, and helped with work at the stations. In the evenings they gathered at the dancing-ground, to watch the dancers, hear the stamping of feet, the rapid beating of clapping sticks and the rise and fall of the chanting voices (Kaberry 1939: 52). They grew familiar with the details of their environment and the different types of food they could find there, and learned about their relationship to the land. A person's life was demarcated by initiation stages, during which he or she learned about the sacred meanings of the country and the performance of rituals to maintain the balance in the world. An individual became increasingly a social person who understood his relationships to others and to place and who acquired a responsibility to look after the land and to socialize the next generation (see also Myers 2000).

In a globalized world knowledge systems change rapidly. Although knowledge has never been static, the present involvement of former small-scale societies in a global economy has widely changed traditional knowledge structures. Due to increased access to contemporary information, knowledge has become more fragmented between the young and the old, which may even lead to the emergence of parallel knowledge

systems (see Antweiler 1998: 476). Since most people in Wamun do not live in their own country anymore, and do their shopping in supermarkets, knowledge of, for example, where to find bush food has much less practical value nowadays. The same accounts for language. Whereas talking in Gija is by the elders perceived as most important to communicate with the spirits, young people are losing this ability since they do not need to talk Gija in daily life. Their worldview will be more hybrid (Tonkinson 1999: 138). Most Gija children live in the same house as their grandparents, and are often reared by them, but they also go to school. At home they will be taught the Dreaming stories and they will visit the country during the weekends, but at weekdays they attend school, where they are educated in western subjects. Television also widely expands their view of the world. Like everywhere, adolescents in Warmun are much influenced by programs such as MTV. Most of them are fond of hip-hop and basketball and dream of becoming a famous singer, dancer or basketball-player. However, the majority of them will never, or only temporarily, leave the community.

Since the border between the local and the external is diffuse, local knowledge is in constant change. What was once part of the body of local knowledge in a community, like indigenous language, may become extinct. Over time, ‘borrowed knowledge’ may become integrated in the local knowledge system, which is for example apparent with the incorporation of Christian elements in Dreaming beliefs (see McDonald 2001). Yet, local knowledge is usually contrasted to ‘western knowledge’, both by indigenous peoples and researchers, who conceptualize local knowledge as ‘the specific cultural heritage of minorities’ (Antweiler 1998: 480). To make this contrast remains important, especially in the light of indigenous intellectual property rights (see Williams 1998) and a global tendency towards a ‘monoculture’ (Antweiler 1998: 480). Warmun elders see it as their responsibility to make sure the next generation follows up the Law. They usually contrast gadiya knowledge (what children learn at the school) to bush knowledge. The next paragraphs will be about their teachings, especially through the medium of painting.

Continuing indigenous education

Although the traditional knowledge system has eroded, Warmun elders try to maintain their authority in the educational domain. Occasionally socio-cultural activities such as

corroborees are organized, usually in cooperation with the school, to make children conscious of their identity. 'Make them strong in their *djaan*' (heart), elders told me during such occasions. Boys in Warmun are still 'put through the Law' (during the summer holidays), which involves temporarily separation from their families during which they are circumcised and learn about Man's Law. For girls there are also rites (Woman's Law) that mark the different stages in life. The elders continue in this respect their traditional role in the socialization of young people. The difference is that the daily routine has changed, and that education in the 'bush law' is limited to the holidays. What has remained is the unequal division of spiritual knowledge. Through an age-grading system one will gradually acquire knowledge of one's identity in relation to other people, animals and the land. In this way social persons are produced (Myers 2000: 93).

Painting has become the most regular cultural activity in Warmun. From the start of the local school in 1979 it has been used as a means to teach children the stories from the land and make them aware of their identity. Although the educational function has largely shifted to the art centre nowadays, elders still visit the school once a month to teach children to paint, while school classes also come to the art centre. Children that show a real interest in painting can, when they are older, serve an apprenticeship under a senior relative. How children begin to understand the hidden meanings of paintings and their relationship to it is what we will look at next.

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A lesson in painting

When elders come to the school to teach, it is apparent that their style of teaching fits with traditional ways of passing on knowledge based on 'learning by observation and experiment' (Coombs 1994: 190). One morning I witnessed Mabel and Nancy teaching the secondary class to paint. They had come to the school with Rudy, the art coordinator, and had about ten paintings with them. They took a seat in front of the children, who sat on the floor. Rudy, who sat next to them, held up each painting, asking questions like: 'This is a nice painting. Does anybody know where it is? No? Well, maybe Nancy can say something about it. What's this painting about, Nancy?' The paintings were the work of both emerging and established artists. Mabel and Nancy also



Figure 8. Mary and student during a painting class.



Figure 9. Phyllis applying white ochre in preparation for a corroboree.

talked about the paintings they had not produced themselves. They recognized the painted country and were able to comment on it, although they were much more knowledgeable about the country that belonged to themselves. However, their authoritative position in Warmun allowed them to say something about all paintings. A painting was first associated with the country 'on the outside'. For instance, Nancy said: 'On the way to Kununurra you can see old man sitting down like this,' and imitated a person in a hunched position. She then pointed out the hill in the painting that represented the old man, and told how he had become that hill. Mabel and she constantly referred to the images in a painting and connected them to real features in the landscape and to the mythological past. A white spot in a painting was where an ancestor (*Jarinyen*) made a spearhead; furrows in the country were made by the Rainbow Serpent. 'He's still there, you know,' Mabel said when referring to this ancestral being. The children laughed when she told them the story about the man who wanted to marry his mother-in-law, that belonged to her Moon Dreaming.

Rudy explained the different techniques artists used, such as how to get a smooth or a granular surface, and how to mix in different ochres to get a new colour. It was logical that Rudy explained the techniques and not the artists themselves, as they are used to teach children by demonstration. After the instruction, the children could take a board to start a painting. They were given the choice either to paint their own country or to replicate one of the paintings that had been showed. However, if they wanted to copy a painting, they had to ask Mabel and Nancy for permission, as they could paint certain country only if they had the right to, that is: an affiliation with it, based on ancestry. Children unsure what to paint were asked: 'What's your country?' If they did not know it, Mabel or Nancy told them what to paint, for example: 'You can do that Bow River⁷.' The children made a pencil-sketch first. Most of them knew exactly how to represent their country in their painting; only one boy had to be helped by Mabel when drawing the outline. After the sketching Rudy put down a dozen plastic tins filled with ochres in different colours, which was the starting sign for the children to prepare their paint. They worked in the same way as the elders, by crushing up ochre and mixing it with water and glue. Also when they began to paint, most children seemed to know exactly what to do. Meanwhile, Mabel had started her own painting, while Nancy and Mary, an

⁷ Bow River is an outstation, where quite a few children who go to school in Warmun live.

elder that had joined us later, watched the children and gave them instructions when needed (Figure 8). Sometimes Mary took the brush in her hands to improve a child's painting.

In summary, through this lesson the children were, firstly, taught how paintings refer to the land and Ngarrangkarni. Secondly, painting made them think of the topographical features of the country and how to depict it. And finally, it made them conscious of the link between their identity and places in country. They enjoyed the painting. I had observed classes that taught maths or English or the Gija language, and had noticed that they often were bored, lying on the floor or sometimes just leaving the classroom. Unfortunately, they were too shy to answer my questions, but an older girl, who worked as an assistant teacher told me that she liked painting and paints *Purnululu*, her deceased grandmother's country. However, she wanted to expand her knowledge of country:

I like to do painting at my grandfather's site, but I can't do it. Too many sacred sites. My grandfather warns us about it, but he doesn't tell the stories. Eventually he will tell me.

This aspect of restricted knowledge shows the socio-political basis that underlies painting. Only by acquiring the necessary knowledge, which is an age-grading process, individuals will be able to expand the stories they can paint. At first sight, this seems to place young people in a disadvantaged position as they have grown up in circumstances with less access to country. The elders all had a 'bush upbringing', which provided the 'cultural baggage' one needs to paint. However, in Warmun elders have invented a supportive mechanism to ensure the continuity of the painting tradition and the essential knowledge. In the next paragraph this apprenticeship system will be explained.

Apprenticeship: the novice and the mentor

We keep them going, young people, kids. Culture and everything, bush hunting, painting, telling stories. That's why we do la painting now. And they can keep to know. And they pass it on to their children or grandchildren. Like this mob, with all the young ones.

Shirley Purdey, a 54 year old artist and important ceremonial singer and dancer, told me this and pointed at a few young women around her who painted, seated on the ground,

while their toddlers sat with them. One of these women was Charlene Carrington, the young mother with whom I started this chapter. To outline how an apprenticeship works, I give the case of Charlene as an example. Charlene was born in Perth, but has lived most of her life in Warmun. At secondary school, when she was about 14 years old, she was inspired to start painting by Hector Jandany, her grandfather, who at the time was one of the 'culture teachers' at the local school. She learned the painting techniques by sitting with her grandfather and watching him, while occasionally they worked on a painting together. Besides Hector, her father Churchill Cann taught Charlene to paint. Hector and Churchill were her main 'mentors'. But painting involves more than learning the technique. The technique is just a way to depict the painting's content. Passing on stories that belong to country is an essential component of the apprenticeship. Through painting, junior artists learn new contents that arise from their association with the senior artist. 'Shared country' is a prerequisite in this communication process. For example, Hector taught Charlene to paint Warmun, their shared country. Warmun is Hector's country; both he and his mother were born there. However, Charlene was born in Perth, far from the spirit centres in Gija country. Yet, through bilateral inheritance she can affiliate to country. Her blood tie with Hector connects her to the country surrounding Warmun, and Hector has granted her the right to paint the stories he told her. Both Charlene's parents, Churchill Cann and Sade Carrington, were born at Texas Downs Station, as well as Charlene's grandmother, Betty Carrington. Charlene is thus also strongly affiliated to Texas Downs Station and has been given the right to depict the waterholes, hills, and caves one can find there, as well as some of the stories that belong there. Apart from Warmun and Texas Downs, Charlene also has the right to paint Springvale Country, which is the country that originally belonged to Betty's father, Charlene's great-grandfather.

Expanding one's knowledge

Country and its dreamings are thus handed over from one generation to the next. Knowledge of country and dreaming are vested in older relatives, who gradually reveal the meanings in country. Charlene paints places in Warmun, Texas Downs and Springvale, but her story repertoire is much smaller than that of for example her grandmother Betty. In time she will learn more about the country she is connected to,

that is: every new story she is taught will expand her understanding of country, and hence her painting repertoire. A junior artist always starts with depicting the easily observable features of a place, such as its topographical features and the flora and fauna that can be found there. For example, one of Charlene's paintings, simply called 'Texas Country', contains the following story (source Warmun Art Centre):

This is the country in Texas Downs Station. Texas is Charlene's family's country. Texas is a very beautiful place with many waterholes, fishing holes and hilly areas. There is an abundance of bush tucker, *gerring* (kangaroo), echidna and goanna are all found in this country.

Similarly, when I wanted to transcribe the story of a painting made by an eighteen year old girl, she only told me the names of the hills that she had painted. 'It's my first painting,' she said. 'My father taught me to paint.' Apart from the topographical features of places, beginning artists also represent historical stories in their painting. The 'Mistake Creek Massacre' for example is a story that Charlene often paints. Through it she remembers her Gija ancestors who, in the 1920's, were shot and burnt by a white farmer (see page 3).

Young artists get the opportunity to slowly begin to understand the realm of the Dreaming and its connection to country. It is important for them to visit the country they paint regularly, where the elders show them important sites. Charlene often 'goes bush' with Betty, her grandmother, and Betty's husband Patrick Mung Mung. One time I went with them and was introduced to some significant places in Texas Downs. As my position may be compared to a Gija girl who has just begun to learn, I will use my experience to describe how through these bush trips one comes to understand the variety of meanings that is imbedded in the land.

It was about a three-hour drive to the place in Texas Downs where Patrick, who drove the pick-up truck loaded with eighteen persons (mostly kids who sat in the back), wanted to go. The dirt road to Texas Downs runs through magnificent rocky country, and frequently important sites were pointed out to me. 'Look there, in that hill, you can see the shape of a face. It's a Gija man. There's a dreaming story with it.' We stopped at places to check out the flora: the black plum whose vitamin-rich fruits were almost ripe; a tree whose wood is used to make didgeridoos; a pink hibiscus; the bush orange, whose fruits prevent people from getting cancer. Patrick showed me the old, decayed station

building and the small house where he lived until the 1970s, when the station was closed down and he lost his job as a stockman. Bessy, Betty's daughter, pointed to the place where she was born: 'Over there, at the creek.' When we entered sacred country, the car was stopped near a small stream and Patrick poured water over my head and face, telling me: 'Otherwise you might get sick. The spirits, you know.' Finally, we drove off the track, into spinifex grasslands, until we arrived at a river where we could swim and fish. The children were free to play and swim, although carefully watched by their caretakers. We caught fish, made a fire and cooked the fish in the ashes. On the way back, Bessy asked Patrick to drive to Blackfella Creek, as I should be shown a woman's dreaming that was 'owned' by Betty. At a safe distance the car stopped and Betty and I walked into the direction of the dreaming place. It was a remarkable boab tree that consisted of several boles that did not rise up to the sky, but were bended, touching the ground, as if a hurricane had raged over it. The *jurmulun* or boab tree was called *Marlumalun*, Betty told me. The place was dangerous for boys and men who were not initiated. They should not go near it as this could cause serious harm. As Betty told me, two uninitiated boys had climbed over the tree in the period that she lived at Texas Downs. This had caused an enormous storm and flooded rivers had washed away the camp where Betty lived. People had realized that only a mother-in-law hugging her son-in-law would calm down the storm. They organised this and a man hugged his mother-in-law, which is normally taboo. The storm had died down.

Just one day in Texas Down country had given me the opportunity to survey some topographical features of the country; it had given me some understanding of the use of certain trees and plants; I was told a personal history so I could imagine how Gija people had lived and worked here; I was made conscious of the presence of the spirits, and of the power that slumbered in certain places and that could be set free if the Law was infringed. I could have been told this information in the community, but then I would not have sensed the smell of the country, the whispering of the wind, the colours in the hills, and the presence of ancestral power. To become a painter it is therefore essential to visit one's country regularly. An artist has to be able to create a mental map of the places that she or he is allowed to paint, as well as putting her or his feeling in a painting, that is basically based on one's sensed connection to country. Only by

spending time out in the country an artist will come to understand the meaning of the dreaming. An older relative will show a beginning artist the dreaming places that he or she is connected to, and also make her or him aware of signs of the presence of ancestral power, such as the wind blowing in certain places.

Shaping country

A novice in painting will at first copy the painting style of the mentor. The first painting of the eighteen year old girl that I mentioned earlier was an almost exact replica of the paintings her father made. Like he, she depicted the hills in layers that were demarcated by white dots. Gradually, when a beginning artist develops confidence in painting, he or she will start to experiment with new forms to display country and dreaming. This heterogeneity in painting forms is a feature of Warmun art. Compared to for example Yolngu paintings of which clan designs are a crucial component (see Morphy 1991: 170), there is much less stylistic uniformity in Warmun. Each artist develops an individual style that is distinct from, yet related to that of other Warmun artists. The relatedness can be seen in the use of ochres and in the usually planar perspective.

Let us compare one of Charlene's paintings with two other paintings, made by her grandmother Betty Carrington and her grandfather Churchill Cann (Figures 10, 11, 12). The paintings represent the same place, Red Butte Hill, but as we can see, the painting styles differ significantly. Red Butte is a significant large red hill located in the northern part of Texas Downs. The Ord River flows past the hill, while a waterhole lies behind it. Both Betty and Charlene have depicted Red Butte in the top part of the painting, with much space around it, which makes the hills stand out. The shape they have given to the hill differs in their respective paintings, as does the composition in the bottom part. Betty has been more detailed in the depiction of the landscape, painting the gorges that run off Red Butte and into the Ord River. The hilly country in the foreground gradually meets up with the (famous) sandstone hills of Purnululu. Charlene's depiction of the place is slightly different. She has put the river to the fore (the blue parts in her painting), while the black hole in the centre of her painting is the waterhole that actually lies behind the hill. Yet, while Charlene's and Betty's paintings bear some resemblances, Churchill's painting of Texas Downs is a completely different representation. He paints the country from an aerial perspective, covering a much larger



Figure 10. Charlene Carrington: Red Butte Hill

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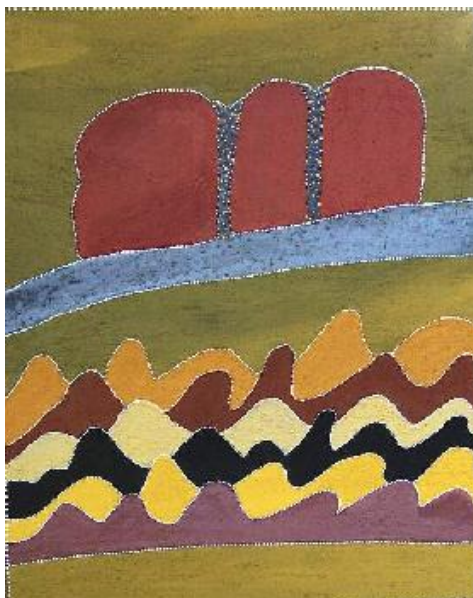


Figure 11. Betty Carrington: Red Butte Hill

© Warmun Art Centre



Figure 12. Churchill Cann: Red Butte Hill

© Warmun Art Centre



Figure 13. Hector Jandany: Murrung Murrung

© Warmun Art Centre



Figure 14. Charlene Carrington: Texas Country

© Warmun Art Centre



Figure 15. David Cox: Gilagowa Springs

© Warmun Art Centre

part. The top part in his painting, coloured brown, is Red Butte, while the black region located on the left hand side (or west from the hill) is a river named Horse Creek. The colours in his painting are dark, giving expression to the sad feelings associated with the gorge Horse Creek flows into, which is the site of a large massacre.

There is thus not one way of depicting country and the stories in it. Every artist structures the country according to his or her image of it. It usually takes some time experimenting before an artist has found his or her style. Charlene has gradually developed hers. Her paintings are not actual representations of the landscape. She mixes different styles, such as the aerial view of Churchill with the conical shapes that Hector (Figure 13) produces, thereby creating something new. We can see this in Figure 14. Charlene focuses on certain elements in the landscape, without depicting the whole context. Waterholes are an important theme in her paintings, as we already saw in Figure 10 where she depicted a waterhole that actually lies on the other side of the Red Butte, and see again in Figure 14, where the round shapes in the middle represent waterholes. In some paintings, she not only mixes different styles, but also integrates different places, like that of Hector and Churchill. Such paintings really symbolize Charlene's identity that is partly built up of her relationship to different places in country.

'Holding country', the reproduction of social persons

'Looking back to place', 'looking after place' or 'holding country' are terms that are used among the Gija when they refer to responsibilities concerning places in country. Myers (1986: 149) has described what 'to hold a country' means for the Pintupi:

To 'hold' a country is to have certain rights to it, mainly the right to be consulted about visits to the place, about ceremonies performed there, or about revelatory concerning its ritual associations held elsewhere. To carry out this status, one must know the story of a place, the associated rituals, songs, and designs. What one 'holds' or what one 'loses' or passes on is essentially knowledge.

This definition can also be applied to the Gija conception of 'holding country'. Holding country or looking after it is based on one's affiliation to country and one's knowledge of it. It is a social status that only elders can achieve. Among the artists one can read this status by the size of their paintings: artists who paint the largest canvasses, with a size of 140 x 100 centimetres, are recognized 'holders' or 'bosses' of their country. To

be a ‘boss’ of country is however not just a status, but is considered necessary for the continuation of life. ‘Bosses’ know how to communicate with the spirits in the country and how to influence supernatural powers. Several times elders told me, for instance, how they could make the rain come. As shown in the previous chapter, country can become dangerous if certain rituals, like welcome blessings, are not performed, or when the Law is infringed.

The traditional knowledge system secures the social production of persons who can hold the country (Myers 2000: 89). Myers has made clear how the Pintupi image of social continuity is one in which country as an object is passed down from generation to generation, and contributes to the substance and identity of the recipient (ibid.). As we have seen this is exactly what Gija elders aim to do in their role as mentors at the art centre. Through painting, country is passed on from one generation to the next, and young people gain an understanding of how their identity relates to country. Relationships with kin become perceived as sacralized, since they originate from the same ‘source of life’. It is therefore that knowledgeable people from one’s close kin can pass on the right to paint certain country. Painting is an incentive to learn more about country, which is why young painters spend much time with elders, both inside and outside the art centre. Ritual knowledge is vested in the elders, but through time they will pass it on to the next generation, who then become the new ‘bosses’. Elder and artist Gordon Barney told me, referring to his seven-year-old grandson Kelvin:

I’m learning him to paint. But he is only little fellow! I want him to grow up strong. Following my way, strong culture way, you know.

Concluding note

Many people believe that in Warmun the ‘real art’ will disappear together with the elders. They say that traditional knowledge is almost gone. They partly base this on the changing painting styles. A painting made by the 30-year-old artist David Cox (Figure 15) for example, looks very abstract and modern; at first sight one will not discover a landscape in it. Yet it does represent *Gilagowa Springs*, David’s mother’s country, and symbolizes the power of two Dreaming snakes that converged on this country where two tribes live. It is a modern artwork but it is not less ‘real’ than the art works of the elders in the community as it emanates from David’s belief in and connection to the Dreaming, which is what makes it ‘authentic’.

Like the Dreaming is still sensed in the country, even though roads and electricity poles have become new elements in the landscape, paintings, however innovative they are, remain representations of the Dreaming. People who say that traditional knowledge is disappearing in Warmun do not take into account that painting, even in its most modern form, functions as a way to gain traditional knowledge. It is unpredictable to what extent knowledge will be lost or kept, but young artists are keen to learn from the elders, and pass their knowledge on to their own children. In other areas of life in Warmun, there is less observed need to apply or even learn traditional knowledge of country, due to the change of context in which younger people live. Painting, for which traditional knowledge is essential, thus strengthens the ties of young people to country. It has become a new way of socializing young people in the spiritual domain of life, turning them into responsible people who look after kin and country. The commercial value of painting makes it attractive for young people to start with it, but this is not the main aim. Children usually develop an interest in painting by being surrounded by painting family members, who stimulate them to give painting a try. Some children also feel a real responsibility to continue the stories from the land. A fifteen-year-old girl whose grandfather had just deceased, said: 'I have to look back to place. My grandfather told me to copy his painting.'

4. Aboriginal art in a global landscape

When we move away from the rugged remoteness of the East Kimberley - from the intense red land through which once the rainbow serpent glided, shaping rivers on its way, from the rocky hills where eagles soar and ancestral beings are said to sing their songs – into crowded cities where time has a different rhythm, we still find Kimberley landscapes. In art galleries, museums and other buildings all over the world there is a possibility to come across a painting made in Warmun. The last decades have seen an increasing popularity of Aboriginal art, both in the tourist and the fine art sectors⁸. While in the 1960s Aboriginal art was largely unknown and excluded from the western category of art, in the 1980s national art galleries began to compete with each other in building up their collections, and galleries specializing in Aboriginal art cropped up (Morphy 1995: 219). Nowadays commercial sales of indigenous art – a category that entails all distinctions between ‘fine art’ and ‘souvenirs’ - are estimated at somewhere between \$100 million and \$300 million a year (Altman 2002: 11). There are about 70 indigenous art centres in central Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia, which serve between 5,000 and 6,000 artists, and represent between \$10 million and \$10.5 million-worth of art-work sales (ibid: 16). With an income of \$1.1 million from painting sales in 2002, Warmun Art Centre is one of the larger Aboriginal art centres in Australia.

There is not an exclusive answer to the question of why Aboriginal art has become so successful. Morphy (1998: 417) has emphasized the role of Aboriginal agency in making Aboriginal art part of the Australian agenda. During the 1960s and 1970s, Aboriginal political activists increasingly used art as an instrument in asserting their rights to land and cultural recognition (ibid. 1995: 219). A famous example is the 1963 bark petition that the Yolngu Aborigines from Yirrkala presented to the Australian government to ask title for their land (ibid. 1998: 254). Art, having a high status in the west, came to serve Aboriginal people as a political tool. In this space they could

⁸ A general but imprecise distinction is made in the industry between ‘fine art’ and ‘tourist art’. ‘Tourist art’ generally encompasses boomerangs, didgeridoos, small to medium-sized paintings and trinkets, souvenirs and clothing, while with ‘fine art’ those artworks (usually paintings) are meant that are allocated a higher status and are collected by museums and galleries (see Altman 2002: 15). However, in practice these categories blur. Warmun art is labelled as ‘fine art’ but is also produced for a tourist market.

produce and contest difference, identity and cultural value (Marcus and Myers 1995: 11). However, although Aboriginal agency has been vital in calling attention to indigenous concerns and in increasing the visibility of Aboriginal art, other factors should not be overlooked. These are more structural in nature, and found at the level of policymaking concerning black-white relationships. Myers uses this approach in his latest work (2002), emphasizing the role of the Australian state, its policies and institutions, in the recognition of Aboriginal art. In 1972 the newly elected Labour Government endorsed a new Aboriginal policy, called 'self-determination', which was founded on the idea 'that local control and autonomy will have beneficent effects on people's confidence, self-esteem and success in acting on the world' (Myers 1995: 64). To solve the problems amongst Aboriginal people (poverty, high mortality, despair) as caused by previous assimilation policies that had ripped people away from their cultural roots, it was thought that Aborigines should be found a place in the economy that was culturally meaningful for them (ibid. 2002: 130). The promotion of Aboriginal arts and craft fitted well in this aim.

The stimulation of a market for Aboriginal art proved to be so successful that it developed into a hundred-million-dollar industry that easily surpassed the revenues of non-Aboriginal visual art. At auctions the prices for Aboriginal artworks rise to top levels, showing how fashionable this category has become⁹. The Australian nation-state has increasingly drawn on Aboriginal imaginaries to express Australia's uniqueness, as for example could be seen in the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney¹⁰. Although in general these developments have been positive for Aborigines, providing them with an income and a 'visual voice', the artistic freedom is limited by the fact that they have to produce their art, as Venbrux (2002: 225) mentioned, 'within an infrastructure and artworld that is not of their own making'. Just as at the Olympic Games in Sydney a positive image was expressed of Aboriginal culture, emphasizing its oldness and spirituality, Aboriginal artworks that conform to a preconceived idea of

⁹ Unfortunately, Aboriginal artists often do not profit enough by the sales of their works, as there are no resale royalties in Australia. It is quite common that a painting for which an artist was originally paid hundred dollars, is sold for tens of thousand of dollars in secondary sales (see Altman 2002: 14).

¹⁰ In the opening ceremony of the 2002 Sydney Olympic Games, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander People played a major role. Members of over 250 'indigenous nations' took part in uniting ceremonies (such as the Awakening Ceremony), while several indigenous groups performed their own ceremonies. Aboriginality was shown as a positive image. Political speeches, demonstrations and marches had been forbidden beforehand.

traditional Aboriginal culture are among the ones best sold. As Morphy has stated, Aboriginal art moves in a global art market that reflects western rankings of other traditions (1995: 217). When artworks do not match western standards of the 'genuine Aboriginal' their authenticity is often questioned. It is for this reason that urban Aboriginal art is much less popular than for example the dot paintings made in the central desert. The latter stand for the 'different', more 'exotic' and 'pure' Aboriginal, while urban artists are seen as westernised and detached from their roots, even though they too still have links to their land. The Brisbane based Aboriginal artist Richard Bell (quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 2003) questions the position of Aboriginal artists in the global art market by asserting: 'White people say what's good. White people say what's bad. White people buy it. White people sell it.'

What we have to keep in mind however is that opinions on Aboriginal art are constructions that change over time. It is in social interaction that new perceptions are shaped, that dichotomies break down, and that representations are handled with more care. Aboriginal artists themselves play an important role in challenging western concepts, though economical circumstances often force them to adapt to white middle-class tastes. Yet, at art centres, where culture is produced, an active negotiation of identity can be observed. In this chapter I will draw attention to the organizational structure of Warmun art Centre and how paintings are transformed to be received in the wider world. The role of art coordinators, who act as mediators between the artists they represent and the global art market, gets much attention.

Transcending boundaries

Warmun paintings became known in the west and categorized as 'art' when Mary Macha, a representative of Aboriginal Traditional Arts¹¹ in Perth, visited Warmun in 1980 to have a look at the ceremonial Gurirr Gurirr boards (Kjellgren 2002: 359). She liked the aesthetics of the boards, but found it hard to persuade the artist (Paddy Jaminji) to sell them. He finally agreed, but only on condition that he was given the materials to make a replacement set (ibid.). Such an agreement shows that in Gija culture, as in most other Aboriginal cultures, people are not concerned with storing

¹¹ This was a government-sponsored art gallery that had as its aim to promote Aboriginal art, and that sent out representatives to look for prospects in Aboriginal communities.

paintings as long as they have the means to reproduce the images and symbols. Over the next several years, Macha began to purchase boards regularly, and also stimulated other Warmun painters (like Rover Thomas) to paint for the commercial market. The paintings, initially produced for ceremonial and educational purposes within the locality of the community, got a new destination in museums and galleries, including the National Gallery of Australia. Their aesthetics were much praised in the art world, where Aboriginal art had just started to become acknowledged for its visual invention, for its powerfulness as ‘abstract paintings’ (see Myers 1995: 68, 69).

The Gija, who had only recently returned to their country, may have been surprised by gadiya’s interest in their paintings, but they accepted it very pragmatically. As Kjellgren (2002: 361) narrated for artist Queenie McKenzie: ‘I bin starting painting now. I bin all there looking at this Rover [Thomas]. This Rover makin’ money la this paint alright. (...) My head bin workin’ now. [I thought] I’ll try this painting.’ The money was welcome in the newly established community that at the time had only the most basic facilities (see Ryan 2001: 252). According to Hector Jandany it was partly used to raise funds for the school. But whether the money was used for communal or personal aims, through the involvement of non-Aboriginal people painting became a way of earning an income in Warmun in the 1980s. I am emphasising the economical aspect as in the west Aboriginal painting is often mystified, as if it takes place in a sacred realm outside the ordinary world. Most Aboriginal artists see painting as a job, similar to being a stock worker or government employee (Kjellgren 2002: 365). Yet, this does not mean that the content matter of their paintings is of no significance. As explained in chapter three Warmun artists only paint country that ‘belongs’ to them, bestowing their knowledge of and relatedness to it. Although painting for a western audience is different from painting for local, ceremonial purposes since during the latter sacred knowledge is included, there are in essence similarities. In both instances it is through objects that one’s identity is objectified to the spectators, in order to affect them and to elicit reciprocal recognition (Myers 2002: 5). Myers, when referring to the Pintupi, has called this the power of ‘making visible’ (ibid.). Warmun artists do not experience the sale of paintings as ‘selling images’ but rather as ‘revealing Dreaming knowledge’ in return for money and recognition. For this purpose they have transposed an indigenous institution to fit in an exchange relationship with non-Aboriginal people.

However, the different ontologies of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have, especially in the past, lead to frictions when artists experienced that gadiya did not treat them and their paintings in an appropriate way. This happened for example when artists felt they were not paid enough for their paintings, especially when others, who depicted the same important Dreamings, were paid more. Here, the importance that non-Aborigines attribute to the aesthetic value of paintings conflicted with the crucial value Aborigines allocate to the knowledge imbedded in their paintings. Artists' strong identification with their works can also lead to concern for what will happen to their paintings once sold. Kjellgren found that Warmun artists frequently lament losing control of their works, not knowing what will happen to them and sometimes feeling sorry for their country being in another place now (2002: 367). Yet, most artists take pride in knowing that their paintings are sold worldwide. On the other hand, I noticed that they feel deeply grieved when finding out about their paintings being sold at auctions for much more than they were paid for it. They feel this money belongs to them.

Since the establishment of Warmun Art Centre in 1998 the interests of Warmun artists are taken better care of. Before, artists sold their work individually by displaying it for tourists at the Turkey Creek Roadhouse or through an Aboriginal art cooperative in Kununurra (see Ryan 1993; Kjellgren 2002). This was not an ideal situation: individual sales led to exploitation by people who bought paintings cheaply to resell them at a substantial profit, and as Kununurra is at a distance of more than 200 kilometres from Warmun, for most artists it was not possible to go there with their paintings. When the interest in Warmun art increased in the 1990s¹², some leading artists lobbied successfully for their own art centre. From then on, control of prices was guaranteed and the cultural content of paintings became an important factor in the sale. In the management of the art centre, art coordinators play an essential role and it is to them that I will turn now.

¹² In 1990 Warmun artist Rover Thomas was invited to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale, together with urban Aboriginal artist Trevor Nicholls. This event resulted in a worldwide interest in East Kimberley art, with exhibitions both inside and outside Australia (Kjellgren 2002: 363).

Managing Warmun Art Centre

Since the Australian government began to promote Aboriginal art movements in the early seventies, art coordinators (or, as they are also called, 'art advisers') have played an essential role in representing Aboriginal people by marketing their art to a non-Aboriginal audience. As Myers (2002: 131 ff.) has described, the first art advisers had prior experience of working with Aboriginal people, often as schoolteachers. As such they were already closely involved with the situation in remote communities, and committed to help Aborigines in gaining more recognition for their culture. They acted as a bridge between the bush and the metropole (ibid: 147), stimulating community members to paint and supporting and advising them in this, while maintaining good contacts with the commercial art world and thinking out strategies to sell artworks. Thirty years later, art coordinators are still very much needed at remote art centres. Today they usually have a more professional background, and more skills in management, but the nature of the job has not changed much. The fact that they are still of non-Aboriginal descent, indicates that whites are still needed in Aboriginal communities to act as agents for Aboriginal people.

Like most indigenous art centres Warmun Art Centre is community-owned and controlled, which means that community members are involved in decision-making and that the money from painting sales is returned to artists and their families (60 percent flows back to the community, while the other 40 percent covers necessary costs, such as painting materials, maintenance and wages). The two art coordinators, Carolynne Hamdorf and Rudy Panozzo, are employed by the community, and are thus expected to act in the interests of the latter. They started the job in May 2001 and are the second couple of art managers in Warmun. Before turning to their motivation as art coordinators, I will describe their daily routine, which shows that the job demands many skills and a lot of flexibility.

Rudy and Carolynne literally live in the art centre – the building they live in (the community's former telegraph station) is art gallery, office and living space at the same time, and beneath it is the working space of the artists. They start their day early in the morning by opening the workplace downstairs and making the place ready for the artists. Either Rudy or Carolynne drives to the community to pick up artists, and then the morning is occupied with preparing art materials, supporting artists (chatting with

them, making them tea), recording stories of paintings, receiving visitors and phone calls. In the afternoon, when the artist have been taken home (as it gets too hot to paint), paintings have to be wrapped up in order to be sent, recorded story material has to be fed in the computer, e-mails have to be answered, and there is general office work. Other tasks are developing new materials and techniques, promoting sales and arranging exhibitions, taking artists out on bush trips to collect ochres, visiting school classes, and organizing weekly meetings with artists. Carolynne and Rudy often spend the weekends outside the community, for example in Kununurra, to be away from the workload, but some weekends are also spent going out on bush trips with some Gija families. The role of art coordinators is thus not limited to the work of economic or business mediation (Myers 2002: 161). They live in the community, which implicates that they are usually incorporated in the local kinship system and more or less treated as relatives, and therefore expected to fulfil reciprocal obligations. Myers has pointed out that for many art coordinators this is part of the pleasures of the job, as one acts with Aboriginal people on a very personal level, but that it can also be experienced as a pressure, especially when Aboriginal values conflict with the economic realities of the work (ibid.). It is a well known fact that art coordinators often burn out early, due to the combination of long working hours in an isolated area and the complexity of synthesizing Aboriginal and western discourses (ibid. 147 ff). What then is it that attracted the Warmun art coordinators to the job and how do they deal with participating in two worlds?

Personal motives of art coordinators

Rudy and Carolynne have a background in both the arts and management, but did not work with Aboriginal people before. Rudy Panozzo is a qualified accountant, who has taught business development, law and accounting at university level, but who has also been a tour manager for an outdoor physical theatre company that toured Europe, and has led guided mountain climbing expeditions to Argentina. Carolynne Hamdorf completed a Bachelor in Education, majoring in visual arts and drama, taught children for five years and then started working as an arts facilitator for a local council in Victoria. She worked in Melbourne as the marketing manager of 'Regional Arts Victoria', an organisation that takes performing and visual arts to country regions.

Before she came to Warmun she completed a postgraduate diploma in Arts and Entertainment Management. Thus, in contrast to the early art advisers who Myers (2002) describes in his book, Rudy and Carolynne had many management skills before they started the job. As the market for and the production of Aboriginal art has expanded extremely, and as there are no government marketing groups anymore¹³, commercial skills of art coordinators have probably become more important than in the past.

The motives of Carolynne and Rudy to work as managers of Aboriginal art are quite idealistic. Carolynne told me that when they worked as volunteers at a regional arts festival, the idea came up 'that art is an extremely powerful tool for social change'. Since they disliked jobs that are 'too removed from the grass roots' and had an interest in working with Aboriginal people in a community context, they applied for the job in Warmun. They are motivated to contribute to the social welfare of artists and the broader community and have an interest in learning about Aboriginal culture. As Carolynne said: 'I now feel I have a far more balanced understanding of what is happening in Aboriginal Australia. Also I love this country and having the opportunity to learn from senior artists special stories and places in this country has been a real treat.' At the time of my fieldwork Rudy and Carolynne had only worked in Warmun for a couple of years, but were determined to stay somewhat longer. The personal relationships they built up with the artists as well as the beauty of living in a remote area, added much to the value of the job. Another art coordinator, Tim Acker, who formerly worked at the art centre of Balgo Hills (Warlayirty Artists) and deputized in Warmun when Rudy and Carolynne had their holiday break, similarly expressed 'the treasures' of living in an Aboriginal community. He had got so used to living in remote communities, that he identified with that way of life rather than with city life, feeling somewhat displaced when returning to the city, even though he also realized that he did not really belong there:

It's a weird sensation, travelling from a community out into the 'bigger' world. Even after a few years of doing it, it still feels odd... in some ways it gets odder and odder. Sometimes it's hard not to be dismissive about it, but that's just as dangerous as disappearing too far into the life of a community in which you are always a visitor. But there is something more substantial and immediate about

¹³ In the seventies, government marketing groups like the Aboriginal Arts Board and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts supported local art movements by buying paintings and providing grants to prevent cash flow problems (see Myers 2002: 155).

community life... life on the edge, with life and death consequences, but also a simplicity or pragmatism that is not considered in city life. Or something like that.

Personal motives - experiencing community life and building connections with Aboriginal people - are probably for many art coordinators important incentives to take up the job, as also appears from Myers' accounts (2002: 183). Making a career in the art world is not very plausible when working at remote art centres, as one is too removed from the South (ibid: 180). The art coordinators that I spoke did not seem to have as their aim to advance in that world. Rather, they seemed to reject its culture of status and politics. Tim Acker who after his period in Warmun worked as a project manager of Desart in Alice Springs¹⁴ told me: 'I miss that immediate, tangible nature of work at art centres. Here it's all a bit esoteric and lots of politics and currents and agendas running. Hmmm... quicksand in all directions.'

Art coordinators who do not feel committed towards the people they represent, which determines their daily interaction and their integrity in agency, would probably not last long at art centres, since the people they work for expect them to be helpful and personal. However, there is a need for balancing distance and compassion in interacting with Aboriginal people, as Carolynne told me: 'I try to be empathetic, but I don't get too close.' This was partly because she felt she needed to maintain some boundaries for herself, since the workload already was much, but also because she thought it was important that people did not rely too much on her, but maintained their independence:

As a white person living in an Aboriginal community I cannot interfere with people's lives, but I can help inform and educate people about the types and kinds of choices they make. I do challenge local people to be responsible for themselves and not to blame others for their problems. (...) Aboriginal people need greater support, and I am not talking about more money, they need greater support to determine to what type of boundaries and parameters they will live their lives and ultimately influence how they continue as a group of people. They are masters of their own fate and they need to realise that they effect what happens to them.

Tim Acker agreed with this, but according to him Warmun artists are very independent compared to the artists in Balgo Hills: 'I am really surprised. It's great to see this mob

¹⁴ Desart Inc. is an organization in Alice Springs that provides support services to Central Australian Aboriginal art centres, fostering and supporting community development, cultural maintenance and economic growth (www.desart.com).

just going their way and being so independent. It was a complete different story in Balgo, where I had to arrange practically everything for artists. I guess it has to do with Balgo's mission history; people being made dependent on whites and getting used to whites organizing everything.'

The independence of the people of Warmun is also visible in the history of the community being established and built up by community members (see Ryan 2001). On the other hand, the problems in the community (such as alcohol dependence, high unemployment level and violence) show that many people feel out of control of their lives. People of non-Aboriginal descent, such as teachers and nurses, are still needed, because community members do not have the educational qualifications to apply for these kinds of jobs.¹⁵ This means that they are still dependent on the agency of non-Aboriginal people.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even though Warmun Art Centre is coordinated by non-Aborigines, the art centre plays an important socio-cultural for community members, empowering them to reach some of their goals in life, as will become clear.

The holistic nature of art centres

Indigenous art centres are unique enterprises in that they have been structured in such a way as to meet the particular needs of artists (see Altman 2002: 12). They are not just commercial enterprises but play an important socio-cultural role in communities, which is why they can be called 'holistic'. This attribute also determines the way art coordinators and artists interact. As Carolynne told me: 'We are concerned for the whole person and not just for the art they [sic] produce.' Interaction between artists and art coordinators thus includes many needs that fall outside the range of art production. People come in for a chat, or for advise about money affairs. They ask for rides into town (Kununurra) when the art coordinators go there, and during weekends the art coordinators occasionally take some people out for trips into the country, which bonds their relationship with some Gija families. Overall, the art centre functions as a meeting place for people interested in cultural matters. Relatives of artists often visit the centre

¹⁵ See Keeffe (1992) on the Aboriginal struggle in the area of education.

¹⁶ However, there is a vicious circle here: even if young Aboriginal people get their diplomas, the social structure in Aboriginal societies, where hierarchy is not accepted, makes it hard for them to stand out. It is not appropriate for local people to act in a 'whitefella's way'. People then remain dependent on whites, who are allowed (as outsiders) to take decisions as long as they fulfil their reciprocal obligations (see Myers 1986: 282 ff.).

to have a look at paintings, and to ask about and comment on the cultural contents of art works. It is a place where culture is taught and learned, and it is a place where individual artists can engage themselves in painting without being disturbed. The art coordinators thought that the creation of a tranquil space was one of the most important things they could offer the artists, who in community life, with its problems of alcohol abuse and violence, experience much tension. As Carolynne told me:

Painting for some people, like Mabel, is her only form of solace and quiet time, where she has time for herself. Painting isn't only about how many paintings you can sell; it is about providing an outlet and opportunity for creative and meaningful endeavour for a group of people who don't have a lot of options.

I found the atmosphere at the art centre relaxed. Art coordinators and artists communicated in an intimate and humorous way, which is also a sign that the coordinators had become confidants. No pressure was put on artists to produce work. Anyone not in the mood to paint was free just to sit down and have some tea. In the same way, every person in the community and the surrounding outstations, child and adult, was given the opportunity to give painting a try; they could come in and get the necessary material, provided that they would return the finished painting to the art centre. If they did not they would have to pay for the material the next time they came to the art centre, but in practice both the material and money get lost in these circumstances.

Making the art centre remunerative

The holistic nature of indigenous art centres, the social versus the economic goals, turns them into vulnerable commercial enterprises. As Altman (2002: 19) has noted, they face a financial risk in their responsibility to market the work of all artists in the community, including the ones whose work does not sell well. A related problem is that artists sometimes feel a financial pressure to speed their level of production, due to poverty, demands of extended family or alcohol dependence (ibid.), which results in paintings that are of much less quality. Art coordinators, who need to make art centres remunerative, have a difficult task in solving such problems of increased production and decreased quality. Without hurting artists' feelings they have to push them to change their ways of working in these circumstances, otherwise the status of the art is in danger of declining. Carolynne told me that when she and Rudy started in Warmun they

encountered this problem of overproduction. They attempted to slow down the rate in which artists paint by individually encouraging artists to connect to each work. This approach worked and they managed to slow down the painting rate from thousand paintings to seven hundred a year, while the number of artists increased. According to Carolynne, the past twelve months (November 2002 until November 2003) have seen a significant increase in the demand for Warmun work, both from the side of individual purchasers and galleries. She admitted that some works will never sell, but thought it important and more than appropriate 'to encourage and give everyone the opportunity to try.'

An essential part of running an art centre is maintaining close ties with art galleries, both the commercial and the national ones. Exhibited artworks greatly increase the status and visibility of local art movements, which is why it is important for art coordinators to have good skills in promoting works. In Warmun, representatives of Aboriginal art galleries occasionally visit the art centre (important days that are well-prepared), while the art coordinators are sometimes also asked to select work to be displayed in an exhibition. Paintings that Rudy and Carolynne regard as high in quality will not be shown in the art centre's gallery or on the Internet, but are kept aside for exhibitions and sale to art galleries. One would expect art centres to set standards of quality. However, Carolynne told me that selection of work is subjective:

The more you look at the work, the more obvious what is a good and what is a poor painting. I think what constitutes a great work is the level of commitment and energy that the artists bring to the canvas at that point in time. It is captured and seen in the work.

Yet, the art coordinators' knowledge of the art market and its current taste will necessarily play a role in the selection of artworks. They will have to consider which paintings sell well in a particular (preferably prestigious) niche. Tim Acker told me that he regretted that the western audiences' preference for 'neat and spacious' paintings had caused 'messy' paintings (paintings with lots of big dots, unevenly distributed on the canvas) to almost disappear in Warmun. Especially the younger artists in Warmun produce spacious paintings that are aesthetically pleasing for the western eye (and are often thought of as 'minimalism'). It is presumable that art coordinators advise artists on western tastes.

To make locally produced artworks stand out from art that is made in other regions, art coordinators also propagate the distinctiveness of the art they represent. The regional

variation in painting styles that already existed before European colonization¹⁷ has become a hallmark of art movements. Aboriginal producers of contemporary art are thus encouraged to maintain these differences in the works they deliver (Venbrux 2002: 228). Warmun art's uniqueness is expressed by the paint that is used (traditional ochre and natural pigments) as well as by the way the landscape is depicted (en profile). These features are always mentioned in descriptions of Warmun art.

The exhibitions Rudy and Carolynne selected work for during the past year either sold out or sold to 85 up to 90 percent of the total number of works on offer. Such numbers indicate the high recognition of Warmun paintings as 'fine art'. However, before paintings can enter the art market, they go through a process that transforms them in such a way that they come to concur with western notions of authentic Aboriginal art. In the following paragraphs I will elaborate on this topic.

Producing cultural value and 'authenticity'

Aboriginal art is ultimately produced for a white market. In remote Aboriginal houses one will not encounter any paintings on the walls – the country and its stories are part of one's being and need not be externally stored to remember them. Art for art's sake has never been a part of Aboriginal culture. The 'consumption' of Aboriginal art (as art per se) is thus a non-Aboriginal thing, and it is for this reason that Aboriginal paintings are somewhat transformed as they leave their creator's hands. They are placed in a context that is meaningful to westerners and that concurs with preconceived ideas of 'authentic Aboriginal art'. As such, cultural value is produced for the purchasers of indigenous art works.

Aboriginal paintings are prepared for the market by documenting them. Documentation entails the transcription of the painting's origin and 'story'. Once a painting is finished art coordinators ask the artist about its story and write this down. Together with information on the identity of the artist and the features of the painting (size and medium) the data are stored in the art centre's computer. A digital photo is usually added. Purchasers of Aboriginal art obtain a copy of their painting's data, which in Warmun follows a structure like the one below (description of a painting made by

¹⁷ Think for example of the large differences between the Arnhemland x-ray style and the dot paintings from the Central Desert.

Marlene Juli):

ARTIST: MARLENE JULI

Skin Name: Nangari
Language: Gija
Age/Born: 27 years KUNUNURRA
Lives: Warmun Community (Turkey Creek) WA

TITLE: DAIRELINGIN – PAPER BARK SPRINGS

Catalogue #: WAC 743/02
Size/Medium: 70 x 45 / Natural ochre and pigments on canvas

This is where Goolarbool the Dreamtime snake ended his journey of creation during the Dreamtime.
This place is known as Paperbark Springs.
There is a waterhole that never goes dry.
This place is my mother's and grandfather's country – Springvale Station country

The documentation of paintings has become a convention in the world of Aboriginal arts. Paintings without 'stories' are significantly devaluated in price as they lack the wanted evidence of 'authenticity' (see Myers 2002: 159). Documented paintings are valued more since they identify the producer and give some indication of the 'Aboriginal meaning'. As we see above, Marlene Juli's identity as an Aboriginal artist is indicated by depicting her skin name and language group. These are of no relevance in white society, yet mentioning them demonstrates that the painting is made by a 'real' Aboriginal, in whose society a kinship system that is exotic to westerners is an integral part of the social structure. Such features add to the sense of 'otherness' of the painting. The same uniqueness is brought forth by the story content of the artwork. Purchasers of Aboriginal paintings like to know that the paintings they buy are meaningful; that their contents carry an essence of the culture they emerge from, as I observed in the gallery of Warmun Art Centre. Moreover, the story was often the deciding factor in the choice whether to buy a painting or not. When looking through the art centre's collection, customers selected a painting because they liked the image. The next thing they usually did was turning to the art coordinator, saying something like: 'I wanna know the story first before I decide to buy it.' If they did not like the story they did not buy the painting. The one time I saw this happen, the rejected painting's story was about a

postcolonial event. Expectedly, the stories that appeal most to people are from the Dreaming, as these confirm the difference and spirituality Aboriginal people are supposed to have. Such difference has greater added value, also since the objects serve as conversation pieces in the social environment of the buyers. 'You know the story in the painting and you talk about it over dinner,' as Sydney art historian Garry Darby said (*Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 2003).

The practice of documentation

Art coordinators have a responsibility to both artists and buyers to document conscientiously. Artists are concerned with their stories being passed on well, as this medium is their only way to reach western society, and to buyers 'accurate stories' attach much cultural value to paintings, which meanings otherwise cannot really be understood. In my role as a volunteer at the art centre I participated during one month in transcribing stories, which gave me some insight in the complexity of this job.

Documenting paintings is time-consuming work. Once a painting is finished it is put aside to dry, a catalogue number and the name of the artist are written on its back, and then, usually several days later, the story is written down. Artists are not always present when art coordinators want to document, so that they have to be visited in the community or the job has to wait. Sometimes the art coordinators made an appointment with artists, especially those who painted at home, to record their painting stories. At other times artists came in on their own initiative and proposed to tell their story. The 'recording sessions' were usually inside the place where the paintings were stored, so that artists could have privacy while passing down their knowledge. During these sessions the art coordinator wrote the story down in a book next to a sketch of the painting. Later this information was inserted in the computer.

My own experiences with these recording sessions are that I found them both pleasant as well as frustrating at times. It was a wonderful way to make contact with artists I did not know yet and I enjoyed their proud way of telling me about their paintings. But I also thought it was very difficult to transcribe stories accurately. This had partly to do with the language barrier – although I had got used to pidgin (Aboriginal) English, I still had difficulties understanding some people, especially the older ones – and for another part with my unfamiliarity with the topography of the

country around Warmun. People referred to the depicted country first and I often just did not get the name of the place right. It signifies how important it is for art coordinators to be familiar with the local country, and with which persons belong where. Another aspect that made the recording of stories complex was the fragmented way in which some artists told their stories. Sometimes it was necessary to return to an artist to get a better comprehension of a story. This of course is due to the different contexts in which artists and art coordinators live. Art coordinators have to make stories comprehensible that emerge from a different ontology. For example, Nancy once told me about her painting of Red Butte while working on it. She pointed at a particular spot in her painting, symbolizing a cave, telling me about the woman that lived there:

One old lady travelled there. Long, hard walk. She met an evil spirit who persuaded her to follow him. Then she fled into a cave. When we went camping in my land, at night we heard noises as if chopping wood. That was her. Now we don't hear that anymore. I think she gone.

When I had a look in the computer later, to see how this painting was documented, I noticed that it contained more information than what Nancy had told me and that the details were different:

Red Butte is a large red hill on Texas Downs Station. Nancy has painted it as the red hill in the centre of the painting. The Ord River runs past Red Butte Hill. In the foreground is the flat area known as yowl yowl country. This country becomes incredibly thick and boggy in the wet season. In the early days one old lady from Mabel Downs Station went hunting for sugarbag (honey). She got lost and kept walking this way, on to Lolly Creek and then ended up in a cave in Red Butte. She stayed there for good. This old lady's name was Gudbarriya, she turned wild, and couldn't go back to her people. She got used to being on her own and ran away when she saw people. There are many nowanns (caves) in Red Butte Hill. Nancy has painted the smaller hills in southern Texas Country, these gradually meet up with the sandstone hills of Purnululu (the Bungle Bungles).

Obviously, Nancy had told a somewhat different story to the art coordinators than she had to me; that is, she had told another part of it. The geographical information of the area around Red Butte may have been obtained during earlier conversations with Nancy. Artists paint many versions of certain country and Dreamings and may draw attention to a different aspect every time. Earlier information has been databased and may be added to the new story, to make it more 'complete'. However, stories are never really complete as happenings in the present can be added to them, such as Nancy hearing the woman chop wood. As this information was not included in the documented

story, it does not give real insight in the meaning of the Dreaming as eternal, and visible in the present. The story is very understandable when reasoning from a western ontology since it shows the psychological state of the woman as 'lost' and shy of people. Because it does not mention that the woman had, according to Nancy, seen a spirit and later turned into a spirit herself, some esoterical meaning is lost, even though it is mentioned that 'she stayed there for good.'

The girl and the photo camera

In chapter two I mentioned Mabel's story about the girl that accessed country to which she was not blessed, after which the rainbow snake covered himself with a shine, so that nothing was seen on the photo the girl took. Mabel told me it was very important to write this story down well, as well as the Gija names for the represented country. Obviously she was concerned with the power of this place that could be harmful to people who had not been welcomed to the country, which is why she also wanted the names to be written down with care. This story then can be interpreted as a warning. The photo that was taken by the girl was kept in the office of the art centre, as a kind of 'evidence'. I wrote the story down as Mabel had told it to me, so it could be inserted in the computer. However, later I found out that a different story, the one that Mabel had told earlier about her country, was inserted as the accompanying story for the painting:

Dairelingin lies north of Springvale Station. The creek running across the painting is called Nyawarrin. This creek runs down from a hill where diamonds have been found. The creek flowing down to the right of the painting goes to the station. Goorlabal, the rainbow snake, travelled down this creek in the Ngarrangkarni (Dreaming) and stopped at a waterhole near the station. Darragyn is Mabel's country.

The newer re-edited version, which is a wonderful example of the dynamism of the Dreaming as continuing in the present time when modern elements like photo cameras can be a part of it, awakening ancestral beings from their slumber, has thus been lost in favour of a story that represents the Dreaming as 'past'. Although I suppose that the reason the art coordinator had not incorporated the new story, was lack of time, instead of unwillingness to acknowledge the Dreaming as 'present', it may be possible that he thought the 'camera story' was not suitable for commercial sale. As Neuenfeldt (1997: 116) has written on the interpersonal facet of cultural production (in respect to tourism

in Alice Springs): 'Mass tourism tends to regard ethnicity and race as romanticised and fixed categories and underplays their socially constructed and dynamic nature.' The majority of people with a western background, especially Europeans, who are the largest group of buyers of Aboriginal art, have a romanticized notion of Aboriginal culture as 'pure' or 'primitive' (that is: uninfluenced by the west) and like to see this idea confirmed in the art they buy. As a consequence, Aboriginal artists are restricted in their expression by tourist tastes. It is for this reason that Christian subjects do not appear in Gija paintings that are made for the art market (see Kjellgren 2002: 365). Such imagery does not sell as it is regarded as inauthentic. The position of art coordinators is a difficult one in this respect. Carolynne and Rudy showed much responsibility in the careful documenting of painting stories. But as it is their task to maintain the marketability of the paintings, they have to take into account western preferences. Dreaming stories that contain modern elements may also be too complicated for an audience that is not familiar with this subject matter.

Mabel's story of the girl with the camera gives an insight into Aboriginal people's experience of the Dreaming as 'ever-present' and challenges the prevalent western understanding of the Dreamtime as a myth, a creation story of the past. It stands out because a white person figures in it, a girl who has evoked the power of the rainbow serpent and has thus become part of the 'virtual memory of the Dreaming' (Glowczewski 1999: 6). Through her action a new Dreaming event happened: the rainbow snake (that had become one with the waterhole) covered itself with a shine. The photos made by the girl had led to this interpretation, and thus a new Dreaming story was added to the cultural repertoire of the Gija.

The reason why Mabel had painted this story was that she considered it important for white people to know about the dangerous aspects of the country. The Law dictates that no one can enter sacred land without permission. Therefore, Mabel explained in her story that people have to be 'welcomed' first. I have seen a few painting stories in Warmun that revealed such contemporary Dreaming events. They make understandable that Aboriginal people experience the Dreaming as an always-present pulsing energy of which all life forms are part. Contemporary events are thus just as well part of it as events from the past. This is not realized by many westerners, but the incorporation of

such story content in paintings can be a trigger to make people aware of this meaning of the Dreaming.

Visitors of Warmun Art Centre – the search for spirituality

When, here in the Netherlands, I talk with people about my research in Warmun I always get the same questions about the nature of the paintings. Is this art still spiritual as it is produced for the market? Do these paintings really link to their culture or do those Aborigines just make stuff that sells? These are exactly the questions around which the authenticity-debate revolves. There is an enormous interest in Aboriginal spirituality and in the objects that are a sign of it (like paintings and didgeridoos), especially in Europe, but this interest is still largely based on westerners' fascination with the 'ancient' and 'conservative' (see Weichart 2000: 151). To link 'authenticity' with 'making money' is for some a contradiction in terminus. However, Aboriginal art does sell and purchasers of this art believe that what they buy is a genuine part of the culture it emerges from. It is to these buyers of Aboriginal art and their ideas of Aboriginal culture that I will now turn my attention.

The majority of white people that visited Warmun Art Centre joined one of the 'wilderness travel' companies that offer tours in the Kimberley and have as part of their program a visit to Warmun Art Centre. These often sunburnt tourists usually just looked around at the art centre, joined the informational tour by one of the art coordinators, but did not buy paintings. For many of them it was the first time they visited a remote Aboriginal community. Most of them did not know much about Aboriginal art but showed an interest in it. For these people, Warmun Art Centre has an important educational function. The information provided can trigger people's interest in Aboriginal art and culture.

Besides these groups of tourists coming and going, there were people who visited Warmun Art Centre with the explicit aim to purchase art. Most of them were European tourists who toured Western Australia and who liked to have a memory of the place. The paintings that represented Purnululu (a national park in the area that is traditional Gija land) sold very well amongst this group. They were not especially interested in Aboriginal culture, yet liked to take an Aboriginal painting home as a sign they had seen 'traditional Australia'. However, there were others that had a deep interest in

Aboriginal art and valued it for both its aesthetics and meanings. For example, there was an Austrian couple that returned to Australia every year since the last fourteen years and each time purchased Aboriginal artworks. As 'diehards' as they called themselves, they liked to extend their collection. What they liked about Warmun art were the natural ochres used and the 'spaciousness' of the paintings. The meanings of the paintings also attracted them: 'We like the way Aboriginal people connect with their land and with nature. It is a beautiful culture that we can learn from.' They preferred to visit art centres instead of buying art over the Internet as they wanted to encounter the artists in person. Visiting the country where paintings were produced also made them feel that they could connect more with the artworks.

I met a few people at Warmun Art Centre who explicitly liked Aboriginal art as it induced a sense of spirituality in themselves. An Australian 'new age writer', Andy Cowan, told me:

There are a lot of similarities between the Dreamtime and other religious and spiritual traditions. In the west we look at the Dreamtime and Aboriginal art and like the way Aboriginal people connect with their land. But what we should do is find our own Dreaming, our own connection with the country we live in.

A Finnish woman, who travelled through Australia with her four children, saw her encounter with Aboriginal people as a spiritual mission. In Australia she had begun to dream special things. In one of these dreams she was told to go to Purnululu. While camping there, as she told me, she and her children had heard spirits sing and in a dry riverbed they had heard the sound of splashing water. She was a Christian but acknowledged the 'truth of the Dreaming' and saw Aboriginal artworks as spiritual symbols for 'wholeness'.

Since I have not spoken to many buyers of Warmun art, I cannot generalize about what aspects of Aboriginal art attract people most. However, most buyers mentioned its spirituality. Some saw this spirituality as restricted to Aboriginal culture - they admired it, but did not identify with it -, while others mentioned the universal spiritual nature of the paintings. The purchasers of the artworks did not have any doubts concerning the authenticity of the paintings. On the contrary, they tended to see the materials artists work with and the subject matter they provide with their paintings as a sign of the realness of the art. In this respect, the art coordinators' efforts to translate the stories in



Figure 16. Purnululu, a popular destination for tourists visiting the Kimberley.



Figure 17. Marietta Bray painting Purnululu, her mother's country.

an understandable way, and to demand of artists that they paint with natural ochres (instead of with non-traditional materials like acrylics), are successful.

Challenging western minds

As we have seen so far, Warmun artists have to adjust themselves in certain respects to a western sense of 'the authentic' in order to sell their paintings. Hence, they avoid Christian subjects and use natural ochres. But do we have to conclude from this that they are locked in a western framework that dictates what Aboriginal art should be? I do not believe so. As we saw in Chapter Three, artists experiment with new forms, like David Cox whose paintings are not recognizable as Gija landscapes anymore. His non-traditional style does appeal to a western audience, as is also the case with the non-conventional paintings of world-famous Anmatyerre artist Emily Kngwarreye. Over the years, people have become more open-minded and tolerant towards new forms of Aboriginal art. As Weichart (2000: 152) wrote: 'Pink, blue and green spots in paintings are no longer "shocking" but have become popular colours among consumers as much as among producers.' Although such colours will as yet not be seen in Warmun art as it is the art centre's policy to promote the uniqueness of Warmun art through its 'authentic feature' of using natural ochres, artists have other ways of challenging western minds.

The big strength of Aboriginal art is its communicative nature, the stories behind the images. As Andrew Pekarik, a specialist in Asian art, said about acrylic paintings from Central Australia (quoted in Myers 1995: 78):

The real significance of the acrylic movement is its ability to be a point of cultural communication. There hasn't been a language in terms of which these two sides [that is, white and Aboriginal] could communicate. They are so far apart that they can't help but misunderstand each other. (...) These paintings are the first occasion for cross-cultural communication. For Aborigines they represent a way of dealing with the majority world. For outsiders, they represent a way of trying to hear what the other side is saying, because it is in a language that is not threatening.

However, as Myers (ibid: 76) has mentioned, most people don't see Aboriginal art 'as challenging them where they live'. That is, what they see in the paintings is the 'good, spiritual Aborigine' who is at a distance, not a contemporary competing for the same life-space (ibid.). Although I assume that many buyers of Warmun art are attracted to it as they romanticize Aboriginal culture, Warmun art is able to challenge these ideas

since many post-colonial events are documented in the stories. Accounts of massacres and Gija people being chased by the police directly confront people with the cruel history of the Australian nation-state, and with the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land. Aborigines want recognition for their right to land, and use their paintings as mediums to communicate this.

The Gija are very willing to take white people with them into their country, and to show them its significance. Artist Shirley Purdey pointed out to me the importance of this:

Some artists take them gadiya to country. We show gadiya, to teach them, you know. Teach the country we're painting. And now they see us doing it, and they listen.

This is what it comes back to for the artists: that non-Aboriginal people begin to listen to what Aboriginal people have to say. Paintings, as mediums that possess multiple layers of meaning and that are put on walls to look at over and over again, may in this sense be very suitable. They are silent, yet they speak.

Concluding note

Up till now, the Gija are still involved in land claims. Many families would like to start an outstation on their traditional country. Some have succeeded but as most land is in private possession of cattle station owners or in the hands of mining companies, it is very difficult to retrieve country. Paintings of traditional country can be seen as claims, and have in the past also been used to provide evidence in land claims. They have a very strong political meaning.

Unfortunately it is usually the power of money that rules. Artist Nancy Nodea one time expressed her anger and worry when she had just heard that a land claim was not granted:

Them gadiya makem lie to us. They told us we could have the country back. Now they sold'm to gadiya, making big money. They dug in the ground, you know, in Dreaming place. I don't know what's going to happen, I just don't know.

Nancy aimed at the dangerous ancestral power in this place: 'Them workers we've got to give them blessing every time so that they're all right, nothing happens to them.'

Warmun paintings are expressions of the deep attachment the Gija have with their country. To sell a painting is a way of sharing their knowledge and identity. They may not have the power to influence political decisions concerning Aboriginal rights, but they are able to make people think about contemporary Aboriginal culture. It is for this reason that providing adequate documentation with paintings is most important. Aboriginal art is not transparent, as Marcia Langton indicates: 'responding to the paintings requires work – the work of scholarship, research and attention, just as we cannot understand Renaissance art merely by looking.'

Aboriginal paintings have the power to break down dichotomies and to shape new perceptions. Story content such as 'the girl and the camera' can change preconceived notions of Aboriginal culture as 'static' and 'ancient' into a notion of Aboriginal culture as dynamic and fully participant in the 21st century. Art coordinators play an important role in this process, but as said, it is not always possible to link the commercial with the ideological. Aboriginal people may perceive Jesus as part of the Dreaming, but as long as westerners do not accept such ideas as 'authentic' paintings that carry Christian story content will not be sold.

However, following Myers' conclusion regarding the accomplishment of Aboriginal paintings movements: the effects have been remarkable, 'producing a recognition of their value and power across cultural boundaries' (2002: 361). Gija artists are very content with the worldwide appreciation of their art. However, there is one thing they do not understand, namely: why gadiya don't have their own Dreaming and attachment to land. Once, while a young French artist visited Warmun Art Centre to 'learn from the Gija artists', Mabel was irritated that the boy had asked her so many question about her painting. She thought that he should make his own painting about his own Dreaming. Some artists also seemed puzzled why exactly non-Aboriginal people liked their paintings so much. When I asked Hector Jandany if he had any idea, he told me: 'May be they see diamond in it!'

Conclusion

In this thesis it has been my aim to shed light on the local meanings of Warmun art as well as on the complexities of its involvement in a global art world. I have especially wanted to make clear the difficulties that arise when labels such as ‘authentic’, ‘traditional’, or, reversely, ‘inauthentic’, are applied to contemporary Aboriginal art.

The Warmun art movement has arisen from a local tradition and has become increasingly incorporated in a global art economy. Painting in Warmun started as part of a cultural revival movement in the mid-1970s (when the Gija returned to their original land), was ‘discovered’ by western art promoters in the early 1980s and, through exhibitions in museums and galleries, made known to a wider audience. The large interest in what came to be known as ‘Warmun art’ finally culminated in the establishment of Warmun Art Centre in 1998. The entanglement of the paintings in diverse areas outside Warmun community means that their meanings and functions cannot be reduced to the local, and that they have to be seen as intercultural objects.

Warmun artists consider their painting movement important for two main reasons: its use in the education of younger generations in local knowledge, and in forming exchange relationships with non-Aboriginal people. Both functions are continuations of indigenous institutions. The first establishes traditional mentor-novice relationships, in which young persons learn from related elders how to depict their country and the knowledge imbedded in it, during which their social identity is reproduced. The second function is to be seen in the context of ceremonial exchange, in which one’s identity is objectified to outsiders in order to elicit recognition. Warmun artists experience the sale of paintings not as ‘selling images’ but as revealing Dreaming and other knowledge in return for money and recognition.

The fact that the artists produce for an artworld that is not of their own making, limit them in their artistic freedom. In the west Aboriginal art is in general valued for its ‘otherness’ and ‘authenticity’, in the sense of having emerged from an ancient tradition and unaffected by external influences. Buyers of Aboriginal paintings expect them to be ‘traditional’ and ‘spiritually motivated’. In order for the paintings to be marketable these expectations have to be met, which is a task of art coordinators. Warmun artists are encouraged to paint with natural ochres, and each artwork is sold with a document that

proves its authenticity by mentioning the skin name and language group of the artist as well as the story that is part of the depicted country. Such documents enhance the value of the paintings in the market, and are also considered important by the artists themselves who aim to bring forth an understanding of their relatedness to the land and the Dreaming. However, in contrast to the common sense notion of 'authenticity' in the west, an Aboriginal conceptualisation of 'authenticity' does not exclude change. An 'authentic' painting in the latter sense is connected to the identity of the maker who has been authorized to paint certain country and reveal certain knowledge. Artists paint from the Dreaming, which is to be understood as a creative dimension that is rooted in the past, yet continues in the present. It has a hidden dynamic – the Dreaming ancestors created the land and its beings but their influence continues as a powerful force. Unexplainable events, often concerning death and destruction, are interpreted in the context of what is already known. Dreaming knowledge is therefore continuously expanded. A photo camera can become the main theme in a Dreaming story, as well as Christian topics. From an Aboriginal point of view they do not make the paintings less authentic. Yet, due to the demands of the market such story content is usually excluded from paintings.

Nevertheless, there is hope. Opinions on Aboriginal art are not fixed, but are constructions that change through time. Contemporary Aboriginal artists use new media to express their ideas and these become more accepted, even though urban Aboriginal art is still much less popular than the more 'conventional' dot paintings. Warmun artists are highly innovative in their style of painting and this process continues. I have shown how at a Sydney symposium about East Kimberley art a dialogue between a non-Aboriginal audience and Aboriginal artists was set in motion to enable artists to represent themselves and non-Aborigines to get a better understanding of the meanings of the paintings. Aboriginal art is not transparent and it is therefore most important to provide information with paintings. It is Aboriginal artists' aim to communicate with their art. Through their paintings they hope to achieve recognition for the intimate relationship they have with their country and for the wrongdoings of the past, when many of their ancestors were killed and their land was taken from them. They aim to make their audience aware of the spiritual forces in the country, and the ongoing nature of the Dreaming. The innovations they bring in their paintings have the power to

challenge notions of Aboriginal culture as static and ancient and change them into an understanding of Aboriginal culture as dynamic and fully participant of the 21st century.

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