

BALGO

Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills

The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is pleased to present the exhibition, *BALGO: Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills*. The artworks in this exhibition convey the energy and dynamism of the artists of the Warlayirti Artists Art Centre in the Balgo Hills region of Western Australia.

The small community of Balgo, also known by the Kukatja language name of Wirrimanu, is one of Australia's most remote settlements, with Darwin 900 kilometres to the north; Alice Springs 800 kilometres southeast and Perth 1800 kilometres southwest. Balgo is sited on the Dreaming path of Luurnpa the Ancestral Kingfisher, deep in the Western Desert where the Great Sandy Desert and the Tanami Deserts meet.

Collectively known as Kutjungka, meaning 'of one culture', the local people come from at least seven different Indigenous language groups including the Kukatja, Walmajarri, Warlpiri, Pintupi, Ngardi, Wangkatjungka and Tjaru. Many Kutjungka have family and cultural ties to other desert communities including Papunya 1000 kilometres to the north,

which lead the contemporary Indigenous painting movement in Australia in the 1970s.

The painters from Balgo include a generation of tribal elders who grew up in a context of customary tribal law, initiation and living from the land. Their youth was spent as nomadic hunter-gatherers in the harsh environment of the Western Desert under strict traditional law. It is this traditional knowledge – of their inherited country and its associated stories and ceremonies of the mythic Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) – that Balgo artists paint today in a new and vital art form that blends the ancient with the contemporary; the abstract with representations of landscape; the spiritual with the political.

Consisting of contemporary paintings and etchings, this exhibition presents a range of stories that demonstrate the strong connection Aboriginal people have with their traditions and the ways in which those traditions are being maintained and celebrated today.

BALGO: Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills is produced by DFAT in conjunction with Artbank, the Australian Government's art rental program.



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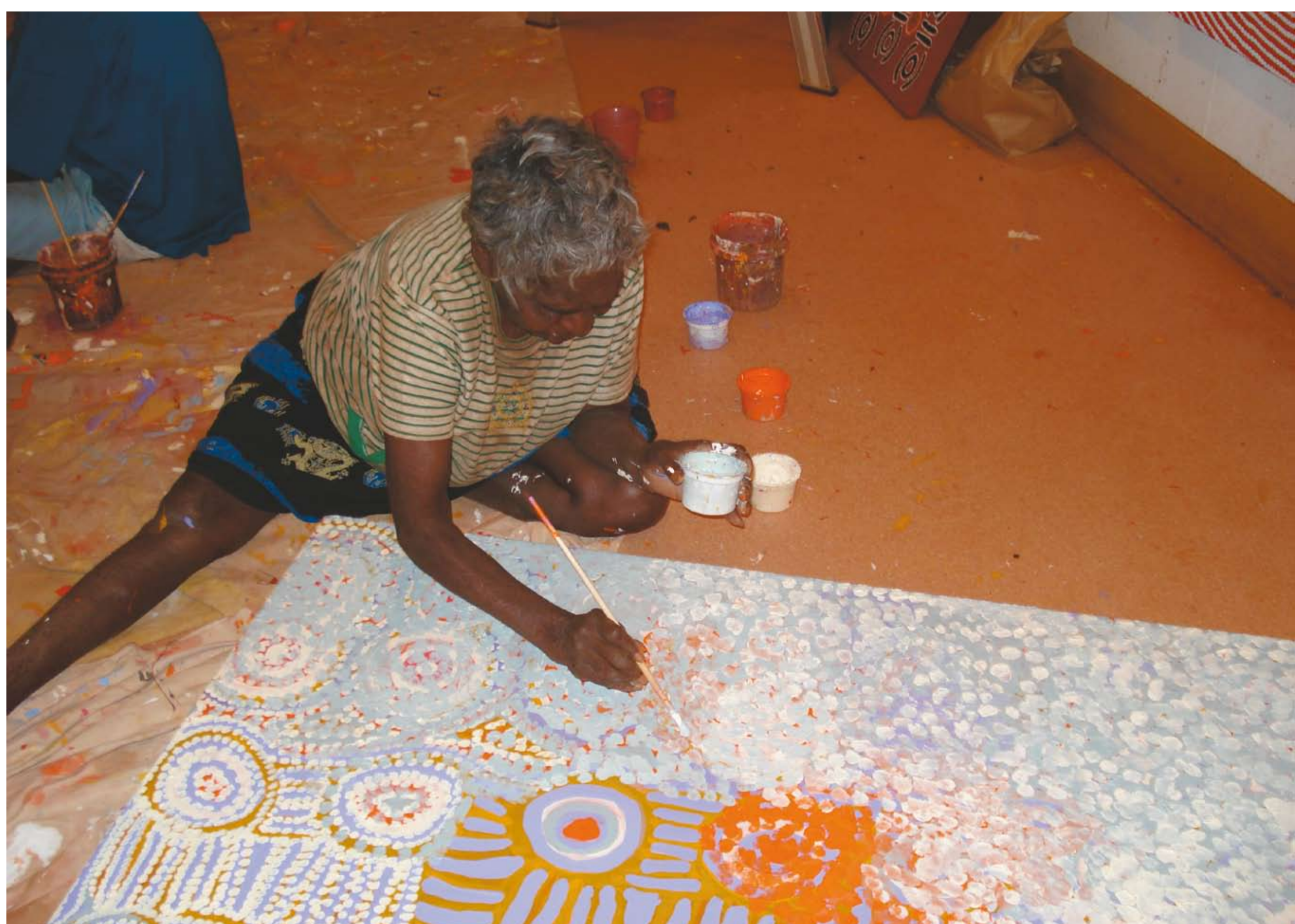
Landscape near Balgo, by Tash Nanala



Waterhole at Paraku, by Erin Baadjo

Warlayirti Artists

Contemporary Indigenous Australian art is an exciting and vigorous expression of one of the world's most ancient artistic traditions. The desert regions of central Australia are home to a number of Aboriginal Art Centres which offer a supportive place for creativity, culture and tradition to flourish.



Sarah Napanangka painting, by Sally Clifford



Lucy Loomoo painting, by Sally Clifford

In recent years, the artists from the Warlayirti Artists Art Centre at Balgo have emerged as some of Australia's leading contemporary artists. They are known for their bright, saturated colour and bold designs that depict the red earth and brilliant blue skies of the Western Desert, and that reflect the changes in the normally arid landscape after rain, as it comes to life, its rockholes and soakwaters fill, and the bush flowers come out in all their glory.

The individual approaches that have emerged include those by some of Australia's international art stars: Lucy Yukenbarri and her *kinti-kinti* style (literally 'close-close', referring to the placement of dots next to each other to form a thick line); Susie Bootja Bootja's innovative dotted colour fields; Helicopter Tjungurrayi's striking parallel lines that direct us to his central soakwater motifs; Boxer Milner's graphic abstractions of

his flooded Sturt Creek terrain, and the painterliness with which Eubena Nampitjin approaches the country of her youth.

Both Bob Dingle Tjapanangka and John Lee Tjakamarra's subject here is Luurnpa, the Ancestral Kingfisher, who led the Kukatja people to their lands in the Dreaming; Fred Tjakamarra shows trees and spears associated with his country around Lake Hazlett just as Tjumbo Tjapanangka paints Wilkinkarra or Lake MacKay, and Joan Nagomara, working in the style of the early days of Balgo's emergence, shows us ritual activities such as hair cutting, that tie her to her country.

Kathleen Paddoon's dramatic red and white minimalism arises from her hills and the associated Seven Sisters Tjukurrpa; Lucy Loomoo vividly, and Elizabeth Nyumi more subtly, convey living water sources and the bush tucker which flourishes

around them; Ningie Nangala maps her country, dominated by major rockholes, in linear fashion, and Brandy Tjungurrayi offers a riotously coloured set of geometries that refer to soakwaters and important Dreaming figures.

The next generation of artists is also rapidly gaining recognition: Pauline Sunfly (who paints Wilkinkarra in astonishing colour combinations), Miriam Baadjo (presenting the important Two Children Dreaming), and Jimmy Tchooga (who brings us his father's creation story) are forging their own direction.

All the artists in this exhibition are custodians of 'country', a notion that incorporates family, history, knowledge, law and identity as well as land or place. By painting, they not only continue to keep their culture strong, but they offer it up generously to be both enjoyed and better understood by enthusiastic audiences around the world.