



Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula
(Indigenous Australian (Pintupi/Warlpiri), 1918 - 2001)

Biography

Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula was born in Mintjilpirri, south of Lake Mackay around 1918. He was one of the Pintupi people and he spoke the Western Desert language. Johnny first encountered white civilisation in 1930 when he hid in a tree upon seeing a plane, which he understood to be a devil.

In 1932 he met an Adelaide University expedition at Mt. Liebig and afterwards, his family moved to Hermannsburg, where Johnny worked as a laborer constructing the airstrip. He continued working in construction. Before the bulk of the Haasts Bluff population was moved to Papunya in 1960, where Johnny was chosen, along with Nosepeg Tjupurrula, as a Australian First Nations representative to meet Queen Elizabeth II.

In 1971 Warangkula was involved in the painting of the famous Honey Ant murals on a school at Papunya. This was the beginning of the Australian First Nations Art movement in general and consequently also of Johnny Warangkula's painting career. Johnny acquired painting material and soon developed his own personal style. He was the first to use the dotting technique to describe vegetation, often applying several layers of 'overdotting'. From the very beginning at Papunya, Johnny has always adhered to the idea that his paintings are stories - Australian Indigenous stories.

He has never allowed any infiltration of European influence and rarely uses literal depictions of objects. Geoffrey Bardon advised the 'painting mob', of which Johnny was an important member, to paint in an Indigenous way using Australian Indigenous signs and symbols that one might have found in body paint, tjuringa or sand paintings. Because of this 'purity' his works retain an integrity which places them amongst the most significant productions from the seminal art site that was Papunya.

Johnny remained an important force in the painting movement until the mid 1980s, when his failing eyesight reduced his artistic output. His work often depicted Water Dreaming stories, as well as Yam, Fire, Dingo, Wallaby and Egret. Many of his paintings stand out from work by other Australian First Nations artists, in the way they present the transitory beauty of water and its transformative effect on the landscapes represented in his works.

"There was in him an invention and transformation of ancient forms and his earlier work may be measured by modern aesthetics, yet his work did not seem to have much conscious European influence."

— Geoffrey Bardon

In early 1997, Michael Hollow, a well known Australian artist himself, made a great effort to revive Johnny's painting career and commissioned him to do a series of small works. This series started a new phase in Johnny's distinguished painting career.

In the following years he developed this direction. The series, perhaps his final one due to failing health, includes a range of small to very large dynamic, powerful paintings in pure red, blacks with white, yellow and ochre highlights. Each of the works features the established imagery of Johnny's Dreamings overpainted to hide the secret and sacred elements. These works evolved slowly over an eighteen month period, during which time the artist displayed once more his mastery of this unique form of art and storytelling. These late works were made despite his failing eyesight and poor health.

Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's works are in all major museum collections in Australia and sought after by many international collectors.

Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula passed away in 2001.



Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula at work in the Men's Painting Room, Papunya, 1972.

Selected Collections

The Holmes à Court Collection, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Orange Regional Gallery, Orange, Australia
Alice Springs Local Courts, Alice Springs, Australia
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
Flinders University Museum of Art, Adelaide, Australia
Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Australia
South Australian Museum, Adelaide, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Central Collection, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
Donald Kahn Collection
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami, USA
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
The Kelton Foundation, Santa Monica, USA
The Collection of Colin and Elizabeth Laverty, Sydney, Australia
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, Australia
Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, USA
Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France
The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia, USA
Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada

“Johnny’s technique and application began a process of evolution which can justify the term ‘contemporary art’ among the Western Desert painters.”

— Geoffrey Bardon

Selected Exhibitions

2024

Utopia in Colours, Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Motiers, Switzerland

2023

Dreaming with your Eyes Open, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

2022

*Irrititja Kuwarri Tjungu I Past & Present Together: 50 Years of Papunya Tula Artists,
Part 2*, Kluge-Ruhe Collection, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
Origins, SmithDavidson Gallery, New York, USA

2021

Lineage & Legacy, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, Australia
Aboriginalities, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels, Belgium
Papunya 50 Years, 1971 - 2021, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2015

Signs and Traces. Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Zamek Culture Centre, Poznan,
Poland

2012/13

Tjukkurtjanu; Origins of Western Desert Art, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France

2011

Origins of Western Desert Art: Tjukurrntjanu, The Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery
of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Tjukkurtjanu; Origins of Western Desert Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,
Australia

2010

Desert Country, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

2001

Icons of Australian Aboriginal Art, Singapore

1999

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, USA
Tjinytjilpa, Embassy of Australia, Washington, USA
Flinders Art Museum Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

1993

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

1991

Low Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami, USA

1989

Australian National Gallery, Canberra, Australia
Mythscapes, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

1982

Brisbane Festival, Brisbane, Australia
George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

1981

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

Selected Literature

Benjamin, R., Weislogel, A. C., *Icons of The Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from
Papunya*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, New York, 2009

Bardon, G., Bardon, J., *Papunya, A Place Made After the Story: The Beginnings of the
Western Desert Painting Movement*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2004

Ryan, J., Batty, P., *Tjukurrntjanu: Origins of Western Desert Art*, National Gallery of
Victoria, Melbourne: Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2011