



Rover Thomas Joolama

(Indigenous Australian (Kukatja/Wangkajunga), ca. 1926 – 1998)

Biography

Rover Thomas Joolama, one of Australia's most acclaimed First Nations artists, was responsible for a major movement in Australian art. He was born to a Wangkajunga father and a Kukatja mother around 1926 at Kunawarritji on the canning stock route in north-western Australia. This route crosses both the great Sandy and Gibson deserts, areas that would play an important role in Thomas's life. At around the age of ten Rover moved to Billiluna station where he started working soon after as a stockman. He subsequently worked as a stockman and assistant fencer at various stations in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and finally settled permanently in the north-east Kimberley region, moving to Warmun (Turkey Creek) in 1975.

It was in this former government reserve that, in a sequence of dreams, the Gurirr Gurirr, a narrative dance cycle, was revealed to him. The catalyst for this revelation was a car accident on a flooded road to Warmun in 1974 in which an elderly woman – Rover's classificatory mother – was seriously injured, later dying as a result. After her death, her spirit undertook the journey home, during which it encountered other spirits. As it travelled eastwards, the old woman's spirit was reminded of recent historical events, including a massacre, and witnessed developing events (Cyclone Tracy). The local population interpreted the ravaging of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy as an act of retribution by the Rainbow Serpent against the decline of cultural practices.

The Gurirr Gurirr follows the spirit's meandering back to country. In the decade that followed, this ceremony was performed at regular intervals at Turkey Creek and adjacent communities. The Gurirr Gurirr, while asserting the enduring memory and knowledge of particular sites, was vital to the development of painting at Warmun. Essential to these performances were painted boards, illustrating the narrative, which were carried across the shoulders. Rover Thomas, who did not paint until 1981/2 supervised Paddy Jaminji in the production of these boards. The Gurirr Gurirr boards inspired Thomas to experiment with painting and other themes.

Nowhere has the merging of past and present, the spiritual and the physical, been more clearly realised than in Thomas's visionary paintings. His landscapes are corporeal, vacillating between figuration and abstraction to suggest the topography of the East Kimberley and the presence of unseen forces within it.



Thomas used the typical palette of the Kimberley in his paintings. He mapped out the land and its stories in tones of deep red and brown ochre, which fill subtle organic forms. The distinctive characteristics in Thomas's paintings is two modes of representation that converge in one remarkable gestural style: while a planar view often depicts roads and flattened country surfaces, profile views describe Kimberley landscape features. His compositions are uncompromising. Thomas used a deeply personal vision to redefine the pictorial conventions of the region. Stylistic spareness in composition, however, belies the complexity of meaning in the picture. History, mythological knowledge and lived experience are simultaneously present in the narrative.

Rover Thomas pioneered the groundbreaking Warmun School, a form of depiction that was later echoed in the work of many east Kimberley artists: Queen McKenzie, Jack Britten, Hector Jandany, George Mung Mung, and the second wave of east Kimberley painters, Rusty Peters, Freddie Timms and Paddy Bedford. By the time of his death in 1998, the Warmun style of painting had become iconic.

Roads Cross, held at the National Gallery of Australia in 1994, was the first major retrospective of the artist's work and in 1990 Rover Thomas and Trevor Nicholls were the first indigenous Australian artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. His work has been seen in many national and international exhibitions. Thomas himself travelled widely and went to Venice and New York. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Western Australia in 1997 in recognition of his contribution to the arts.

Selected Collections

Dr Peter Elliot Collection, Sydney, Australia
Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Australia
The Luczo Family Collection, USA
Kaplan and Levi Collection, Seattle, USA
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton, Australia
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Perth, Australia
University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Holmes à Court Collection, Perth, Australia
The Kelton Foundation, Santa Monica, USA
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Aborigène Galerie, Paris, France

Selected Exhibitions

2023

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

2022

Origins, SmithDavidson Gallery, New York, USA

2021

Aboriginalities, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels,
Belgium
Voyage across Aboriginal Australia – Founders' Favourites,
Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Moitiers, Switzerland

2019

Tiempo de Sonar, Museo Nacional de las Culturas del Mundo,
Mexico-City, in cooperation with Coe-ee Gallery, Sydney, Australia

2018

*Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi
Collection*, Blanton Museum at the University of Texas, Austin, USA

2016

One Road: Aboriginal Art from Australia's Deserts, Travelling Exhibition
in Japan, curated by National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia,
Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, USA

2013-2014

Vivid Memories - An Aboriginal Art History, Musée d'Aquitaine,
Bordeaux, France

2010-2013

Yiwarra Kuru: The Canning Stock Route, Touring Exhibition by the
National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia

2010

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

2006

Aboriginal Art, Art Gallery of Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

2000

*From Appropriation to Appreciation: Indigenous influences and images
in Australian Visual Art*, Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide,
Australia
Images of the Land, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Nicholas Hall, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

1997

Imaging the Land, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

1996

Figures in the Land, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Abstraction: Signs, Marks, Symbols, National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, Australia
This is my Country, this is me, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
Nangara: The Australian Aboriginal Art Exhibition, Ebes Collection
Sichting Sint-Jan, Brugges, Belgium
Contemporary Australian Abstraction, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne,
Australia

1995

Northwest and Kimberley Artists, Durack Gallery, Kimberley Fine
Art, Broome, Australia
Stories: Eine Reise zu den grossen Dingen, Touring: Sprengel Museum
Hannover, Museum für Völkerkunde Leipzig, Haus der Kulturen der Welt
Berlin, Ludwig-Forum für Internationale Kunst Aachen, Germany

1994

Identities: Art from Australia, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan
Power of the Land: Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Solo: Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Solo: Rover Thomas, Utopia Art Sydney, Stanmore, Australia
Yiribana, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

1993

Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

1992

Crossroads-Towards a New Reality: Aboriginal Art from Australia, National Museums of Modern Art, Kyoto; Tokyo, Japan

1991

Aboriginal Art and Spirituality, High Court of Australia, Australia
Flash Pictures, National Gallery of Australia, Australia

1990

Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1990: From Australia, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow and United Kingdom
Anatjari Tjampitjinpa, Dini Campbell Tjampitjinpa and Rover Thomas, John Weber Gallery, New York, USA
Venice Biennale: Australian Representative, with Trevor Nickolls, Venice, Italy
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
L'ete Australien a Montpellier, Musee Fabre, Montpellier, France
Abstraction, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

1989

A Myriad of Dreaming: Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art, Westpac Gallery, Melbourne; Design Warehouse Sydney, Australia
L'ete Australien a' Montpellier, Musee Fabre, Montpellier, France
A Myriad of Dreaming: Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art, Westpac Gallery, Melbourne; Design Warehouse Sydney, Australia
On the Edge: Five Contemporary Aboriginal artists, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Turkey Creek: Recent Work, Deutscher Gertrude Street, Melbourne, Australia

1988

Art from the Kimberley, Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney, Australia
Innovative Aboriginal Art of Western Australia, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Recent Aboriginal Painting, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788-1988, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, Australia

1987

Crossroads, Towards a New Reality, Aboriginal Art from Australia, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan
Recent Aboriginal Art from Western Australia, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia

1986

The Third National Aboriginal Art Award Exhibition, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

Selected Awards and Recognition

2011

Top 50 Collectable Artists, Australian Art Collector Magazine

2003

Top 50 Collectable Artists, Australian Art Collector Magazine

2001

Top 50 Collectable Artists, Australian Art Collector Magazine

2000

Top 50 Collectable Artists, Australian Art Collector Magazine