



Naata Nungurrayi
(Indigenous Australian (Pintupi), 1932 - 2021)

Biography

Naata Nungurrayi was born deep in the Gibson Desert at the rock-hole site of Kumil, circa 1932. She was a highly respected senior Elder and is internationally recognised as one of the most important artists from the Western Desert. Together with members of her immediate family, Naata led a traditional bush life, traveling among the sandhills and clusters of rocky outcrops that erupt ceremoniously across the desert floor. The cycle of nomadic life continued until April 1964 when, in the midst of severe drought conditions, the family decided to join the growing migration of Pintupi people who had made their way to the government settlement of Papunya, some 500 kilometres to the east.

During their journey in to Papunya, Naata's family was joined by another small family group which included Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi, his wife Ningura Napurrula and their family. Together they travelled nearly 400 kilometres to the foothills of Yamunturrngu (Mount Liebig). A Northern Territory Welfare Branch patrol led by Jeremy Long and Nosepeg Tjupurrula met the group there after spotting the smoke from their early morning fire.

The group arrived at Papunya during a particularly difficult period in the troubled settlement's history. The ailing inhabitants, separated from their traditional land and source of food, were experiencing a significant increase in their already high mortality rate. Naata, along with her sister Nancy, began working in the community kitchen, where they help provide meals and rations.

In the dismal conditions that prevailed at Papunya, Naata would have witnessed the genesis of the Western Desert art movement in mid-1971, under the encouragement of a school teacher Geoffrey Bardon. From this poor circumstance a miraculous period in Australian art emerged, one that expressed most vividly the Pintupi's deep desire to return to their distant homelands in the west.



Initially, Naata and her family spent brief periods at the Pintupi outposts of Yaiyai and Waruwiya, approximately 50 kilometres west of Papunya. Once the settlements of Kintore (Walungurru) and Kiwirrkura were established in the early mid-1980s, they were at last able to relocate closer to the country. Naata had traversed in her early life.

Naata, along with a small group of women from Kintore and Kiwirrkura, began painting for Papunya Tula artists in June 1996. Her brother George Tjungurrayi and son Kenny Williams Tjampitjinpa were already established painters for the company. Initially Naata was a reticent member of the women's painting group, often sitting quietly beside her inseparable late sister Ngangi (Nancy Nungurrayi). She worked slowly on small compositions of lines and roundels that loosely reflected the classic Tingari paintings made famous by the male painters of Papunya Tula.

Naata, like many of the new women painters, began painting the sites and narratives that chart the vast tracts of country surrounding Kiwirrkura. Many early works depicted the rockhole site of Marrapinti, which is a pivotal destination in Pintupi life, where men and woman gathered to have their septums pierced for ceremonial purposes. As Naata's confidence grew, so too did her presence among the painters. She developed a unique iconography teeming with giant 'U' shapes, mollusc-like forms depicting rocky outcrops and deep-etched lines representing the endless surrounding sandhills. She has emerged as an instinctive painter whose command of line, colour and form is immediate and breathtaking. Artist and art are rarely so inextricably linked, each a precious balance of cultural authority, artistic spontaneity and whim.

Few contemporary First Nations painters have sustained the attention of curators and collectors so feverishly. Naata has contributed to many major national and international exhibitions including Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2000 and the landmark 2009 exhibition in New York City, Nganana Tjungurrayi Tjurkurrpa Nnintintjakitja – We Are Here Sharing Our Dreaming. A solo exhibition of her work appeared at the Papunya Tula Artist gallery in Alice Springs in 2011.

Paintings by Naata have been acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. She has been a regular exhibitor at Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award and in 2002 her entry depicting the rockhole site of Marrapinti was highly commended by the judges.

In 2003 Naata Nungurrayi was honoured with having one of her paintings chosen to appear on an Australia Post International stamp, and was named among the Top 50 of Australia's Most Collectable Artists by Australian Art Collector in 2004.

Naata passed away on September 24th, 2021.

Selected Collections

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
The Holmes à Court Collection, Perth, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
AIATSIS Collection, Canberra, Australia
Artbank, Sydney, Australia
Aboriginal Art Museum Utrecht (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen), The Netherlands
Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs, Australia
Griffith University Art Collection, Brisbane, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Helen Read Collection, Australia
Harland and Wolff Collection, Ireland
Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Australia
The Luczo Family Collection, USA
University of Technology Sydney Art Collection, Sydney, Australia
Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, USA
Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield Collections, USA
Kluge-Ruhe Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
University of the Sunshine Coast Collection, Sippy Downs, Australia
Luciano Benetton Collection, Venice, Italy

Selected Exhibitions

- 2024
Ladies from Papunya, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2021
Papunya 50 Years, 1971 - 2021, SmithDavidson Gallery Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2020
ORIGINS, Australian Aboriginal Art from the SmithDavidson Collection, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2019
Desert Painters of Australia, Larry Gagosian Gallery, New York, USA - from the Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield Collections and Kluge-Ruhe Collection of the University of Virginia, USA
Naata Nungurrayi Panels, Kambri Cultural Centre, Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
- 2018
East meets West, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2012
Unique Perspectives: Papunya Tula Artists and the Alice Springs Community, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, Australia
unDISCLOSED, 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
- 2010
Wilkinkarralakutu - Journeys to Lake Mackay, Cross Cultural Art Exchange, Darwin, Australia
Desert Country, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
- 2009
Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Tjukurrpa Palulukutu, Kutjupawana Palyantjanya - Sames Stories, A New Way, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia

2008

The Other Thing - A Survey Show, Charles Darwin University
Art Collection, Darwin, Australia
Papunya Tula Artists 2008, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne,
Australia
Ngurra Yurru Kulintjaku - Always Remembering Country, Cross
Cultural Art Exchange (CCAEC) at Harriet Place, Darwin, Australia
*Marrangku Yara Polyantjaku Ngurrangka - Making Strong Paintings
at Home*, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
25th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia

2007

Papunya Tula Artists - Recent Paintings 2007, Cross Cultural Art
Exchange (CCAEC) at Harriet Place, Darwin, Australia
24th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia

2006

Papunya Tula Artists - Recent Paintings 2006, Cross Cultural Art
Exchange (CCAEC) at Harriet Place, Darwin, Australia
23rd Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia

2005

22nd Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia

2004

Pintupi Artists, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
Papunya Tula Artists 2004, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne,
Australia

2003

Recent Paintings by the Women Artists of Kintore and Kiwikurra,
Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, Australia
20th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia
*A Way Through, The Sue and Ian Bernadt Collection, Aboriginal
Paintings by Women Artists*, Central TAFE Art Gallery, Perth,
Australia

2002

Pintupi Artists, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
19th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia
Paintings from our Country, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art,
Adelaide, Australia

2001

Spirituality and Australian Aboriginal Art, Comunidad de Madrid
touring exhibition, Spain
18th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia
Pintupi Art, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
Papunya Tula 30th Anniversary Exhibition, Canberra, Australia
Kintore and Kiwikurra, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne,
Australia

2000

Pintupi Women, Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
17th Telstra NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern
Territory, Darwin, Australia
Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius, Art Gallery of New South
Wales, Sydney, Australia

1999

Twenty-Five Years and Beyond, Flinders University of South
Australia, Adelaide, Australia
New Horizons, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, Australia

1997

The Desert Mob Art Show, Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs,
Australia

Selected literature

Mellor D. & Megaw V., 'Twenty Five Years and Beyond', Papunya Tula
Paintings, exhibition catalogue, Flinders Art Museum, Adelaide, SA,
Flinders Press 1999

Papunya Tula 'Genesis & Genius' exhibition catalogue Art Gallery of
NSW 2000