

# Painter, presenter, preserver

Nyarapayi Giles no longer lives in obscurity in a tiny bush community

NICOLAS ROTHWELL



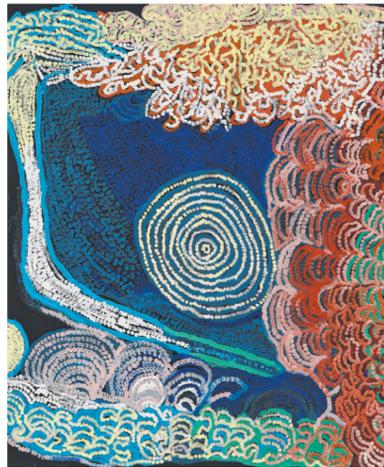
DEEP in the dune country of the western desert, beyond the range-line of the Rawlinsons, beyond the gap at Circus Water, lies the sacred site of Kaarrku, remote, and little visited, with a disused, rusted water tank close by.

It is an ochre deposit, but of an unusual kind: the hematite ore buried there is rich, and concentrated, and highly oxidised. It is in a declivity. You can reach down into the hole and easily bring up whole lumps of ochre — ochre so fine-grained it has a crumbling texture, and seems almost like dust or powder in the hand. On contact with moisture, though, it is instantly transformed; it turns bright blood-red — and in the desert thought-world it is blood's equivalent, the blood of stone and rock, precious beyond measure, much used by senior men in ritual.

Many tales begin at Kaarrku, but there is one story-cycle above all others that belongs to this site. And one of the inland's most spectacularly gifted artists has been quietly painting that story for several years now, in continually varying styles and colours, with ever more startling results.

Nyarapayi Giles, a slight, engaging, intensely active woman, now in her late 70s, first came to the attention of art co-ordinators in the desert almost a decade ago when she began painting alongside members of her extended family during a stay in the little community of Patjarr. Even her earliest works had a vigour to them: she painted bold, intricate designs, she had a way with colour. It was the peak of the desert art vogue: many of her relatives were just then coming to prominence, and achieving great success.

Word of Nyarapayi's paintings filtered out as she moved between



Three of Nyarapayi's large new paintings, all acrylic on canvas and forming a sequence, will be shown in Darwin this month

communities — but her home was little Tjukurla, a settlement on the back road between Kintore and Docker River, and she began painting consistently only in 2007, when a fledgling art centre was set up there. The first co-ordinator appointed to Tjarlirli Arts, Vicky Bosisto, was immediately struck by the works Nyarapayi was making: poised, balanced designs, full of movement, full of the flash of life. Together, the two went on a fast-paced journey together into the art world.

One of Nyarapayi's first canvases for Tjarlirli was hung in the 2008 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award exhibition: it drew attention. Eagle-eyed Perth gallerist Mark Walker had already spotted her paintings in the course of his own desert travels, and he gave her a pair of solo shows. The works were strong and much appreciated. All seemed fair set.

But the trough of the global financial crisis was fast approaching. Private collectors had vanished from the market, and there were the usual ceremonial obligations and familial disruptions of remote community life to keep Nyarapayi from her creative tasks. Pieces by her would crop up during the next few years in group shows from the region's art centres, a handful were bought by institutions, but the closest, keen-

est followers of the desert painting movement were waiting to see more. They already knew what she was — an artist without limits.

In this camp was the leading gallerist of central Australia, Dallas Gold. He had admired her canvases from the first time he encountered them. Last September, at his Raft Artspace in Alice Springs, he staged a majestic show of paintings from the far western desert. He called it *The Wild Ones*, only slightly tongue in cheek, and two large, vivid pieces by Nyarapayi were dominant.

Both displayed her trademark design, two roundels, enmeshed in

something I hadn't seen before. What's impressive about her art is its sheer dynamism. It's awe-inspiring, and it's joyous — you get drawn in, and study them, and they don't diminish, they keep delivering. Often the work's rough, but when its various elements come together the results are extraordinary. They are works with a grandeur, they resonate. I believe she serves as a conduit for the power of desert religion, for those beliefs. You see in them that mix of talent and authority that makes the paintings jump.

Indeed, Gold likes to compare Nyarapayi's work to the strongest

**In Nyarapayi's new work, warring colour seems not so much to highlight pattern as to convey energy and the flicker of light and life**

subsidary lines and arcs of vibrant colour, but her palette had developed: she was using blues and aquas and complex shades of mauve and mulberry and purple, yellow filigree on green ground, red upon cream. As soon as he laid eyes on them Gold felt once more the thrill of the Aboriginal art lover discovering a new world.

"She was on fire last year," he remembers. "The colours and the way they were set together was

pieces of the great male artists of the region: a striking thought.

"Usually," he says, "there's soft aesthetic that becomes very plainly visible when you put a painting by a desert woman next to a work from a senior man. I see in her work a sinew, something more than just a play of colour or composition. I feel it's something about that magic of someone with deep ritual knowledge painting."

But what might that know-

ledge consist of? What are its contours, how does it manifest itself, who from the wider world could read it? As it happens, the "outside" stories of the Kaarrku ochre mine and the nearby site of War-murrungu where Nyarapayi was born are reasonably well-established: it has become standard practice for desert painters to provide a brief account of the creation narratives they place at the centre of their works, and in the case of Kaarrku the story is especially suggestive and offers a little way in to the artist's hectic, richly coloured realm. The Kaarrku landscape is the country of the emu.

It lies near the great arc of men's sacred sites that radiate to the northwest of Tjukurla. Even today, emus are particularly present there, and in the epoch when shape was being imprinted upon the deserts, ancestral emu went digging amid the mesas and the ridges and the claypans, digging for ochre, the blood of life. The concentric circles that dominate Nyarapayi's paintings represent the ochre-laden feathers of the emu reaching down and digging in the pit. The art becomes the country, the tale dictates its pattern, the circle completes itself.

But the careers of desert artists depend on fortune and on circumstance for their fruition, and Nyarapayi's story entered a new chapter in 2012 with the arrival at

Tjarlirli of its present art co-ordinator, Nyssa Miller, with whom she formed a fresh bond. Something in her art had crystallised: she set to work once more in the little community art studio. The small group of collectors and art world insiders who have seen those most recent works made by Nyarapayi can see the change — an intensification of her painting style. She would always give her works a trademark sense of movement. Their colours, though, were of a piece, until now; they were compositions that relied on a kind of harmony.

The handful of large new works made in the past year or so take a new road. Icon mark and in-fill stand in counterpoint: a concentric circle set will be azure, placed against a crimson ground, or atlantic green against brick-pink, with accents of ultramarine and pale lime entering the colour field. The pattern of sandhill lines and interlocking curves spreads out, in varying shades, reds, greys, creams, oranges, always set against each other, so a single cell or fragment of the whole is dissonant, but the whole builds to a rich intermesh. Plenty of other desert artists have gone down this path of using colours that seem at war with each other.

But in Nyarapayi's new work, warring colour seems not so much to highlight pattern as to convey

energy and the flicker of light and life. Three of the most dramatic of these new canvases will go on view for the first time at Darwin's Outstation Gallery this month.

"They form a sequence," says Outstation's Matt Ward. "There's something deeply moving about these paintings. The feeling I got when I was undoing the roll of canvases, as they were being unveiled before me, I just knew from the moment I touched them and opened them up and saw the very edge of the design in paint they were going to be masterpieces."

"I'd seen images of them by email, but this was something special. Even with just a few marks showing, I could feel myself being swept away. These central passages, where she's showing the emu spirit being released from the rock — she seems to me to have captured that moment to perfection, but even if you don't know the story you get the feeling, you catch the moment, and what's happening. Sometimes desert art can do extraordinary things."

How, though? Nyarapayi's central roundels, with their wild deep greys and creams and tawny reds blurring into each other, and their overdrawn, emphatic lines, shouldn't work — yet they hold the eye, and announce themselves, and convey the essence of the subject of their composition. They present the artist's way of seeing, and bring the viewer close to an event unimaginably far off in thought and time.

Until recently, Nyarapayi was an obscure great-grandmother in a tiny, back-road bush community. If anyone in the Western world knew her or remembered her, it was solely for her involuntary cameo role as a young woman rescued from beside a desert track by the mid-century "safari man" Keith Adams, who included her travails in a much-viewed bush adventure film.

Today, though, her place in the Western world is rather different. She is at once painter and presenter and preserver of traditions, an old role, and creative reconceiver of the story-cycles of her birth-place and the past. New and old together, in embrace as strong as the juxtaposed colours of her art.

Nyarapayi Giles's new paintings are included in Darwin Outstation Gallery's exhibition *Tjarlirli Arts: Our Home in Colour*, until July 30.

## Seductive, terrifying response to novels

**DANCE**  
Articulating Landscapes  
Ochre Contemporary  
Dance Company.  
Masonic Contemporary  
Hall, Nedlands, July 22.

DANCE is often a response to music but Ochre's *Articulating Landscapes* is created around text written by Stephen Scourfield and Kim Scott, who pay homage in their novels to this vast land and man's scary, subsidiary place within it.

If the small Masonic Hall in which we sit seems therefore imbued with the terrifying yet seductive aura of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, it's by design and, like kids at story time, we're loving it.

Each work is well-crafted and, proppis, relies on the physicality of this small company's seven dancers, all rippling upper-body movement and strong, pillar-like haunches.

They are accompanied by some haunting music (including a Bach cantata and Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata) and Vermeer-inspired side-lighting. Strangely enough, this European influence sits well with the quintessential Australian ambience.

Jesse Martin's opening *Ghost Gums* and Penny Mullen's *In Between* both used the full ensemble, which variously disentangled from scrums, locked eyes with, and defiantly advanced upon the audience, to convey the "confinement of scraggly, twisted, pressing scrub" described by Scott, or Scourfield's "conspiracy between the blood red earth and china blue sky".

**The dancers were 'smooth as sweat, sweet as weeping'**

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD  
AUTHOR

Matthew Tupper's *Descaped*, and Gary Lang's *Space within Space* featured pas de deux. Tyrel Dulvarie and Yilin Kong were as exquisite in their dark, threatening coupling and sharp disengagement, interpreting mountain and granite ranges, as Floeur Alder and Jesse Martin were in their sensuous duet, suggesting the glide of rockpool water over limbs.

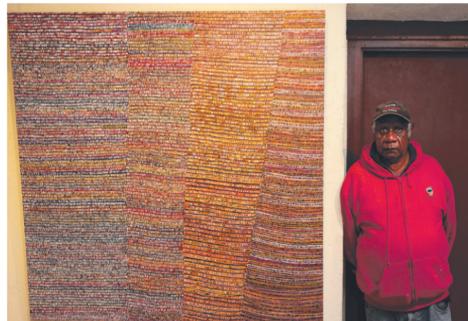
Alder's *Unbreakable Spirit*, inspired by differing generations and performed as solos by Kenny Johnson, Yolanda Lowatta and Martin, hummed with an intense polyphony of crouched geometry and expansive gestures, although the ending was ragged.

To crown the evening, and to reverse the mechanism, Mullen's *Gravitas* inspired Scourfield this time to respond to the choreography, in which he wrote that dancers Dulvarie, Johnson and Martin were as "smooth as sweat, sweet as weeping". It's true the three men had, as he put it, a "velvet" aura in the sweep of their midnight-blue skirts and their smooth, powerful muscular poses (reminiscent of Mr World competitions) but their significance seemed out of place with the spirit of the rest.

In tackling the themes of isolation, panic, awe and intangibility of landscape the company excelled, although there was no overt joy expressed, just reverential awe.

*Tonight at Masonic Hall; July 31 at All Saints College, Bullcreek, Western Australia. Tickets: \$15, online. Duration: 70min.*

## Having a ready market of cashed-up buyers threatens the national outlook of Pilbara artists



Cossack entrant Clifton Mack and *Colours of my Country*

VICTORIA LAURIE

SMALL flitting bats, moths and the invasive stains of cyclonic mud could not deter Cossack Art Award's project curator Katy Eccles from hanging 317 works on the walls of the historic ghost town in the Pilbara, where Australia's richest regional art prize is held each year.

Winners of the total \$100,000 prizemoney, spread over 10 categories, were announced at the weekend in Cossack's customs house and bond store. Joshua Cocking, a Broome-based teacher, was announced best overall winner with his portrait *Rosie*.

Yet Cossack and the local Pilbara art industry face a quandary. According to Eccles's colleague Ron Bradfield, an indigenous art adviser with Perth-based Artsource, almost any paintings produced in Karratha, the resource city that hosts the award, and in nearby Roebourne, are likely to be bought by cashed-up resource workers or mining corporations.

And each year, two huge exhibitions of 100 paintings each are sent down to Perth to hang in the corporate foyers of Rio Tinto and Woodside, both major resource industry operators in the Pilbara.

That advantage may, however, be weakening the impulse to pursue higher quality and a more

elevated national profile for Pilbara-based art, which has only been produced in earnest for about 15 years. It means the artists and their work are far less familiar to art collectors and galleries than the established artistic movements of the Kimberley and central Australia.

"Pilbara artists have the most stable economic environment in which to sell work, compared with the rest of Australia," says Bradfield. "But they work in a bubble that has its own economy, its own cash cow. Artists know if they paint, people will buy it. And they get caught up in it."

"The artistic consequence is that people have no need to look at

their art practice from a national point of view. For them, they make art day to day to put money in their pocket. One of the conversations we're constantly having is how they can grow their art practice beyond the reality they live in."

In response, Cossack's art award offers a six-week residency for the overall winner, with opportunity to work with local artists.

Meanwhile, two local art centres — the Roebourne Art Group and Yinjaa-Barni Art — deliver valuable income to their communities and unique styles.

Says Bradfield: "It's like having two tyre-fitting businesses in town; each tends to do things slightly differently."

Yinjaa-Barni art centre manager Patricia Floyd says the art group, which began in 2005, struggles to keep up with demand. "Apart from the two Perth shows, we have exhibitions each year in Sydney, Singapore and Fremantle galleries. We don't have a lot of time because there's a business to run."

Floyd, who is temporarily living interstate, keeps a close eye on art production by holding Skype conversations with each artist about the progress of their latest canvas.

Several painters from the Yinjaa-Barni group did well in this year's awards: Wendy Darby for *Country with Sallakes* and Marlene Harold for *Emu Seeds*. Clifton

Mack, the group's most prominent artist, narrowly missed out on his 10th Cossack prize.

Meanwhile, the Cossack art award, hosted by the City of Karratha, may need reshaping as its 22nd event ends and the paintings come off the walls.

Eccles says new investment and a permanent curatorial presence are needed — Artsource is brought in for only a few weeks each year. She says it has reached the limit of its hanging space, with not all of this year's entries able to be hung.

"As the award grows and the standard of the artworks increases, the need becomes greater for professional art-handlers to run it."