

Art in Early Childhood

Understanding And Judging Children's Artworks
By 'The Standards Of A Different Procedure':
Space, Cognition And The Visual Art Of 21st
Century Warlpiri And Kukatja School Children

Christine Nicholls
Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

Refuting tacit claims of European art's visual and cultural superiority, Rudolf Arnheim wrote that:

...When the figures in Egyptian art look 'unnatural' to a modern observer, it is not because the Egyptians fail to present the human body the way it "really is", but because the observer judges the work by the standards of a different procedure. Once freed of this distorting prejudice, one finds it quite difficult to perceive the products of the "Egyptian method" as wrong.
(Arnheim, 1974, p.113)

Equally, when assessing artworks by Australian Aboriginal artists, be they bark paintings from Arnhem Land, 'dot and circle' paintings from Central Australia and the Western Desert, or Aboriginal visual art deriving from elsewhere in Australia, Anglo-European observers need to 'free' themselves, to the maximum extent possible, from the 'distorting prejudices' of their own art historical and socio-cultural frames of reference. To become competent in judging these works "by the standards of a different procedure" one needs to develop an understanding of the works at the level of the episteme, and within their own unique socio-cultural framework/s.¹ In this paper I examine the distinctive attributes of contemporary artworks by young, tradition-oriented, school children living in remote Australian Central and Western Desert Kukatja- and Warlpiri-speaking communities, with particular reference to the 'Dreaming Narrative' series of published children's books,² conceived and realised by myself in collaboration

¹ It is necessary to use the plural here because there are many different Australian Aboriginal artistic traditions, based on language and cultural differences as well as differences in geographical location.

² See reference list.

with respected, older Aboriginal community members, over a period spanning 2001-2003 inclusive. This will involve an examination of the narrative conventions and the visual properties of artworks produced by the Aboriginal school children involved.

Introduction

From 1982-1991 the writer of this article lived and worked with Warlpiri Aboriginal people in Lajamanu, situated in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory. Lajamanu, which is more than 600 kilometers from the nearest town of any size (Katherine), is home to more than 700 Warlpiri Aboriginal people, who are also the legal landholders, following success in a 1976 land claim. The climate is harsh, mostly hot and dry, with temperatures sometimes exceeding 50 degrees centigrade in the shade.

Initially, from 1982, I held the position of Lajamanu's first teacher-linguist, working with Warlpiri people to set up the local school's first bilingual education program, in Warlpiri and English. Later, in 1984, I accepted the position of Principal of Lajamanu School, which, over the decade that I lived there, had an enrollment fluctuating between approximately 170 and 250 children between the ages of 2 and 16. I remained there until 1992, and during that time became involved with the Warlpiri acrylic art movement, and fascinated by the children's artworks.

In 2001 and 2002 on my return to Lajamanu, at the community's invitation, I went with a view to collecting a number of Aboriginal Dreaming narratives told by elderly people with transmission rights, and working in the school with those older people and local Warlpiri school children to create a series of books illustrated by the children. The success of this project eventually took me to another Warlpiri community, Yuendumu, and also to a predominantly Kukatja and Ngardi community, called alternatively, Balgo, Balgo Hills or 'Wirrimanu' in the local language. Although the majority of the children participating in this project in all four communities were aged between 5 and 12 years, all 200 plus children in each of the schools participated, including, in some cases, pre-schoolers as young as 2 years old and some slightly older children.

As a result of this project, six picture books suitable for young children were eventually published. To this day those local schools continue to garner royalties for these books, which have sold well in the commercial market, particularly the educational market.

The balance of this article will be devoted to providing a conceptual background to these books followed by an analysis of the distinctive visual properties, governed by specific narrative conventions, of the children's artworks.

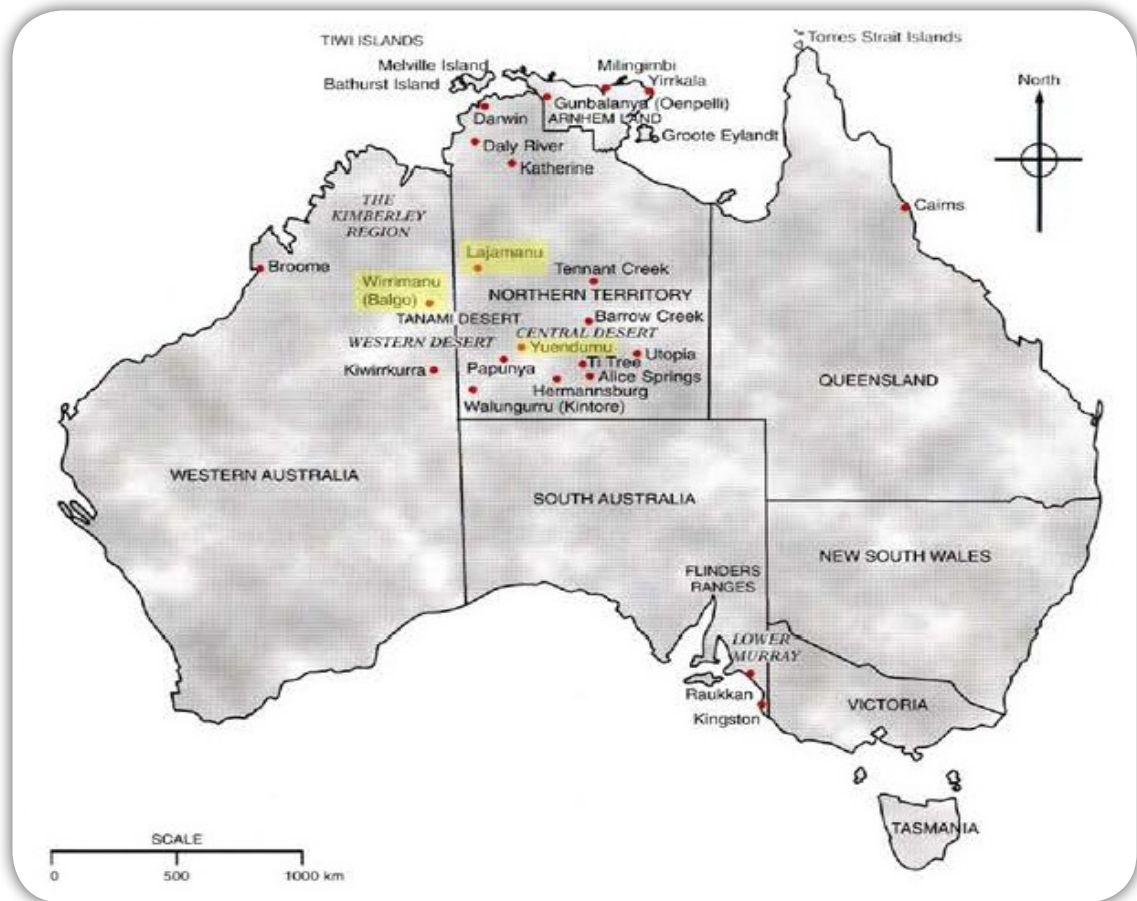


Figure 1: Map of Australia showing the remote Aboriginal settlements of Lajamanu, Yuendumu and Balgo – the sites where the Dreaming Narratives Project took place

“By the Standards of a Different Procedure”: Identifying the Narrative Conventions Governing the Dreaming Narrative Series

This section aims to contextualize the section that will follow in which I highlight the specific visual properties of the Aboriginal children’s artworks. These visual properties differentiate their illustrations from the picture-making of children belonging to the dominant Anglo-European Australian culture, thus demonstrating substantial epistemological differences in tradition-oriented Aboriginal children’s visual art practice.

Because children’s picture books include both text and pictures, this also involves examining the elements that were brought into elaborate interplay in the team effort required to produce such books. It is important to note from the outset that just as the visual properties of the children’s artworks are underpinned by a specific set of cultural conventions differing from those of the dominant culture, so do the oral narrative conventions accompanying these visual elements.

The following are the most significant, identifiable differences in the narrative conventions underpinning traditional Aboriginal Dreaming narratives, compared with the narrative conventions of Anglo-European cultures.

It is important to note that the oral versions of these Dreaming narratives (lengthy narratives relating to Aboriginal Creator Beings and their activities during the foundational time known in poor English translation as 'The Dreaming') are OWNED (that is, subject to the intellectual copyright of specific groups and individuals). Not everyone has the right to transmit these stories orally, nor are people permitted to illustrate these narratives without explicit permission. Permission therefore needs to be sought and obtained. There are public and private versions of Dreaming narratives and, children are only given access to the public versions. When children illustrate Dreaming narratives, it has to be under the direction of appropriate adults, who are usually old or very old. 'Appropriateness' is determined by where the adult Aboriginal storytellers are located in the classificatory kinship system.



Figure 2: Henry Cook Jakamarra, 'Pardi Pardi', owner of The Two Wallabies Dreaming narrative, Lajamanu, 2002. Photograph: Christine Nicholls

Aboriginal children are initially given access to abbreviated versions of Dreaming narratives and then, only if appropriate in terms of their place in the kinship structure as well as adjudged by the children's perceived aptitudes and attitudes, are they permitted to go on to acquire the knowledge associated with more complex or 'inner' levels, which often contain what is deemed to be 'secret/sacred' information.

While such 'secret/sacred' information is often indirectly present in abbreviated versions of the Dreaming narratives, it needs to be related in a 'coded' way, thereby screening and protecting secret knowledge. This has important implications for the kinds of illustrations that enter the public domain. It also needs to be noted that 'full' Dreaming narratives may be 20,000 words in length, or even longer, whereas versions suitable for children tend to be much more brief.



Figure 3: Warlpiri child's illustration on the front cover of *The Two Wallabies*, a Dreaming narrative owned by Henry Cook Jakamarra

All Dreaming narratives are closely related to specific micro-environments in the natural world. For example, most of the action in *The Two Wallabies* (owned by Henry Cook Jakamarra) takes place in a part of the Tanami Desert called Yaturlu Yaturlu in the Warlpiri language ('The Granites' in English), which has been prone to flash flooding for a very long time. Such an incidence of flash flooding wherein one of the wallabies is swept away and drowns is central to this narrative.



Figure 4: Warlpiri child's illustration of the flash flood near Yaturlu Yaturlu in the Northern Territory of Australia that results in the drowning of one of the two wallabies in *The Two Wallabies*, a Dreaming narrative belonging to Henry Cook Jakamarra. Even today, this area remains prone to flash flooding.

The fact that traditionally, and even today, Aboriginal Dreaming narratives are (mostly) orally transmitted needs to be taken into account. One characteristic of extended oral texts is a greater level of repetition and textual 'redundancy' than is usual in written texts. Such textual repetition and redundancy 'scaffold' the considerable feat of 'memory labor' required for the recall, storage and accurate transmission of lengthy oral narra-

tives.

Because differing versions of the same basic oral narratives are transmitted intra- and inter-generationally, there is little to no chance of a single canonical or 'received' version of an oral text (against which all others are judged)³ holding sway. This is much less evident in the written texts of Anglo-European cultures, whether such literature is aimed at children or adults.

In oral cultures, what could be described as 'paralinguistic' (tonal variations, adoption of different voices for the range of dramatis personae appearing in oral narratives, the interpellation of songs, etc), and non-linguistic elements (gesture, mime, dance) also often play a very important part in orally transmitted narratives, whereas in written texts such paralinguistic elements are largely eliminated. On the whole, therefore, written texts are more economical, using less redundancy and repetition than purely oral texts. With written texts it is possible to turn back the page and re-read what one has missed; in the case of orally transmitted texts, repetitions, song and textual redundancy provide listeners with structurally similar opportunities.



Figure 5: Molly Tasman Napurrurla, owner of *The Pangkarlangu* and the *Lost Child* and *The Spotted Cat Dreaming* narratives, Lajamanu, 2002. Napurrurla is renowned as a storyteller with great dramatic flair and she has a large repertoire of paralinguistic devices at her disposal. Photograph: Christine Nicholls

Importantly (and connected with the previous point) there are frequently, although not always, a myriad of minor variations in oral texts, according to the creative aptitude of individual narrators. Equally importantly, with respect to the written texts of the dominant culture, there is a tendency toward the reification of one, single, received version of the text, thereby foreclosing other equally valid interpretations/versions of the same story/text.

In the case of orally transmitted Aboriginal Dreaming narratives, there is no single canonical version, notwithstanding the fact that there are non-negotiable elements in each narrative to which all individual tellers must adhere. Nevertheless tellers are able to bring a modicum of individual prowess to their telling of a Dreaming story. The same applies to artistic renditions of these Dreaming narratives.

3 Nevertheless it needs to be noted that gifted individual narrators/storytellers are often recognised, celebrated and attract considerable social prestige within their own Indigenous Australian societies.

Bearing in mind these differences in narrative conventions, in the following section the distinctive visual properties of the children's artworks compared with the artworks of their non-Indigenous Australian peers will be identified. This necessitates some reference to the Aboriginal adults' approach to visual art making.

"By the Standards of a Different Procedure": an Analysis of the Visual Properties of the Children's Artworks in the Dreaming Narrative Series

1. Absence of Linear Perspective in the Children's Artworks

None of the child artists in this study used linear perspective in any of their artworks, a reflection of their parents' and grandparents' approach to art-making. The latter will therefore be discussed here.

Adult Aboriginal artists of the Central and Western Deserts of Australia do not deploy the illusion of the dimension of depth known as 'perspective'. Perspective is a geometrically based 'invention' that conveys the impression of the diminution of the size of objects as they – apparently – recede into the distance. 'Perspective' is particularly useful for artistic representations of interiors within the built environment in which the mathematical bias is evident. Perspective is clearly and strongly associated with architecture.⁴

Traditional Western and Central Desert Aboriginal artworks do not make use of background, middle ground and foreground to create an illusion of depth. The 'proscenium stage' approach to painting (associated with framing paintings and hanging them on walls) is simply not relevant in the context of Aboriginal desert art.

The so-called 'invention' of the principles of linear perspective, involving the creation of an illusion of three-dimensional space using two-dimensional media, has been hailed as a major breakthrough in art history. This development should not, however, be regarded as a cultural universal against which all other artistic conventions are judged. In fact many of the world's artistic traditions do not use linear perspective. The major coordinates of space and time – and the inter-relationship between them – are conceptualized, in visual terms, very differently by different cultural groups.

Generally credited to the Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi (despite there being historical precedents pre-dating Brunelleschi, who was born in 1377 and died in 1446), the 'invention' or 'discovery' of linear, aerial perspective is based on what is in fact a very simple empirical observation: that the farther away an object is from the 'looker', the smaller it appears to be. A single, fixed and individual 'looking' – or 'observational' – point is strongly implied in this formulation. With respect to Indigenous art from Central Australia and the Western Desert, there is no fixed or single looking point so this 'foreshortening' effect was and is simply not needed.

This is tied to the fact that many older Aboriginal artists, who were born in the bush

⁴ This point is underlined by the fact that the 'invention' of linear perspective is generally credited to the Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446; Loc. Cit), although there are historical precedents pre-dating Brunelleschi's so-called 'invention'.

and bush-educated during their early years, possess what seems to many outsiders to be an extraordinary spatio-temporal compositional ability. (See Lewis, 1976a and 1976b, for more on this). It is connected to the fact that in the 'old days' (i.e. pre-contact times) people moved around vast tracts of their desert country via a system of rotational navigation (as opposed to 'nomadism', which suggests aimless wandering), moving from food source to food source as each food came into season, and from water hole to water hole, or soakage, in order to survive. Such systematic, seasonally repetitive travel on foot meant that desert people often covered a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time. Over the course of a lifetime such journeying over 'country' resulted in encyclopaedic knowledge of that country.

A by-product of being continually 'on the move' in such a fashion was the need for the self to continually 'update', realign and reposition the self-as-actor/viewer/spectator in relation to the larger 'panorama' that constituted 'country'. In relatively few Central and Western Desert Aboriginal artworks by older, first-generation-contact artists is there any one single focus. Where there is a particular focus in a given artwork, the focus is not achieved by utilising perspective. Such foci tend to be on waterholes, soakages or subterranean rockholes, signifying the presence of water, that most precious of commodities for desert people upon which all life depends. This is for the most part achieved by contrasts in colour or form, and by exaggerating the scale of the significant element to signify its relative importance within a given artistic composition. An example appears below in an artwork by one of Balgo's senior male artists, Helicopter Tjungurrayi. Tjungurrayi's natal country, which is depicted, is sand hill country located in the Great Sandy Desert in remote Western Australia. While undulating sand dunes are readily apparent in this work, the central focus of the work is actually an underground waterhole, invisible to the naked eye, but critically important for survival in that extremely harsh environment.

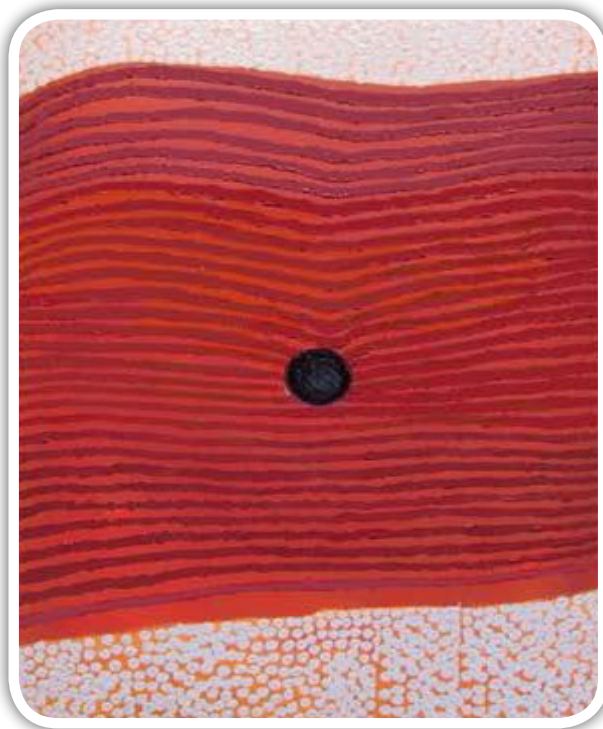


Figure 6: Helicopter Tjungurrayi, 2002, Warlayirti Artists Cooperative, Balgo Hills Western Australia, This Place My Country, hand wiped and rolled, eight colour relief print

As is the case with the older artists in their home communities, not one of the Aboriginal children involved in the Dreaming Narratives project attempted to deploy linear perspective in their artwork, apparently resisting this despite their exposure to mainstream primary school education. In her doctoral thesis Su Dalglish, writing about a young child from a comparable Central Desert Aboriginal group, the Eastern Anmatyerr people, describes the child's approach to drawing in the following terms:

...Nerinda, aged about ten at the time (1998), did drawings for me which were absolutely without perspective. She drew several suns or moons in her picture, moving across the page, this placing 'time' in the composition. The heavenly bodies are sometimes at what appeared to be the top of the page, and sometimes at the bottom. Her older sister however, who had attended primary school, drew scenes which used perspective, and in which there was no reference to 'time'. Her drawings were conventional landscape scenes, in the western mode.

Nerinda laid out the summer sleeping arrangements of her family in her drawings, looking down from above on to the makeshift beds placed outside the house on the sand, describing to me who in her large extended family slept where. The aerial view she had drawn was a clear example of the Aboriginal way of thinking about, and depicting, their environment and landscape they move about in.

(Dalglish, 2000, p.157)

Nonetheless, there is evidence that the children are moving away from the adults' "ways of seeing"⁵ or forms of locational analysis, and moving toward a method that is founded more obviously on 'western' ways of seeing. This is most obvious in how the children's artworks are framed in such a way as to give preference to a more humanistic geography than that of their elders. There is evidence of a distinct move on the part of these Aboriginal school children toward what I have described as a 'proscenium' (Latin for 'in front of the scenery') approach to art-making, that is to say a view of a particular vista seemingly framed by four (albeit mostly invisible) walls. Such depiction carries with it the implicit suggestion of a foreground and background – akin to a rectangular theatrical, architectural, 'picture frame' stage (see Elam and Krasner, 2001, for further information on the cultural specificity of the proscenium stage in western theatre). There is a degree of inevitability in such a development insofar as these children have, unlike their immediate forebears, lead an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, have for the most part been raised in houses, and now experience the dominant culture influences of visual media including television and video, and more recently, computer technology, on a daily basis.



Figure 7: Warlpiri child's illustration from *The Magic Fire at Warlukurlangu*, in which human figures (previously only used in artworks for sorcery-related purposes) have been included.

2. The Use of Scale in the Children's Artworks

As is the case with their parents' and grandparents' artworks, the children used scale to indicate the relative importance of specific elements within their artworks. This was evident in Figure 6, in which Helicopter Tjungurrayi emphasises the importance of an underground water hole in otherwise exceedingly marginal desert country, by dramatically increasing its dimensions in terms disproportionate to other features in the surrounding landscape, most notably the sand dunes which are the dominant feature of that terrain.

Equally, scale is rarely naturalistic in the children's paintings - the importance of a person, or of a particular Dreaming, is usually indicated simply by emphasising the size of the significant element in relation to other natural phenomena depicted in the same work. (Colour may also be used to indicate the relative importance of an element within a painting, as is the case in Figure 6, the artwork by Helicopter Tjungurrayi, in which he deploys both scale and colour to identify the whereabouts of the sacred water source).

Examples of such use of disproportionate scale, for purposes of drawing viewers' attention to significant elements within a particular artistic composition, are to be found in illustrations in each of the children's books. To provide but one example, in Luurnpa *The Magical Kingfisher*, the centrally important actor in the narrative, Luurnpa, is depicted as a colossus, dwarfing the dominant features of the surrounding landscape, in-

cluding even high cliffs and monumental mesas.⁶ This is the means of emphasising the Kingfisher's towering status as a Dreaming Ancestor and Creator Being for the Kukatja people. For outsiders, it seems curious that Luurnpa the Kingfisher is similar or even bigger than the looming mesas close to Balgo – but his disproportionate scale underscores Luurnpa's relative significance in this Dreaming narrative. Size matters! In this, the children are utilizing the same artistic conventions that their forebears have been deploying for countless generations of art making.



Figure 8: Kukatja child's illustration on the front cover of *Luurnpa The Magical Kingfisher*. Note how the figure of Luurnpa the Kingfisher, the Dreaming Ancestor of the Kukatja people on whose 'country' the small Aboriginal township of Balgo (Wirrimanu) is placed, dominates this artwork.

3. The Children's Use of Infill, Line and Colour; Shading and Shadow

Like their parents and grandparents, almost all of the Aboriginal children filled in every bit of the paper. In the author's experience, which includes teaching non-Indigenous children for many years, this is unlike the artwork of that latter group of roughly the same age, who often leave a large amount of the paper empty or blank when they paint or draw pictures. Also in keeping with the approach taken by their older kin, for the most part the Aboriginal children deployed bold, bright colours to depict their subject matter. Indeed, the children emulate both the styles and colour schemes of their elders, who typically use big blocs of bright colour. As is the case with their parents and grandparents, for the most part the Kukatja, Ngardi and Warlpiri child artists fill all of the available space with unrestrained colour. Equally, like older desert artists who did not and still do not attempt to create 'shade' or 'shadow' in their works (this is an imported concept) not one of the children attempted such effects.

⁶ A mesa is a relatively naturally elevated land formation with very steep walls. These flat-topped and broad-terraced geological phenomena are common in arid and semi-arid parts of Australia, including close to Balgo in Western Australia, but also in other similar parts of the world, including in some southwestern areas in the United States (and commonly present in cowboy movies featuring John Wayne).



Figure 9: Warlpiri child's illustrations in *The Two Wallabies* (pp12-13), a Dreaming narrative belonging to Henry Cook Jakamarra.

The fact that the children emulated the techniques of the older artists in their communities was evident in all three communities where the project took place. At Lajamanu and Yuendumu, like their elders, the Warlpiri children typically completed their artworks in one single, extended sitting, whereas at Balgo, like the older people who work in the Art Centre, the Kukatja and Ngardi children repeatedly returned to their works to add further embellishments.

With respect to decorative elements, the children did not attempt to use these to any great extent – but when they did, for example in *The Cocky, the Crow and the Hawk*, they did so in a manner congruent with that of the older artists in their communities, by applying dotting or 'feathering' effects. This may have been over-determined in their case by the art lessons the Balgo had been given by their excellent non-Indigenous art teacher.

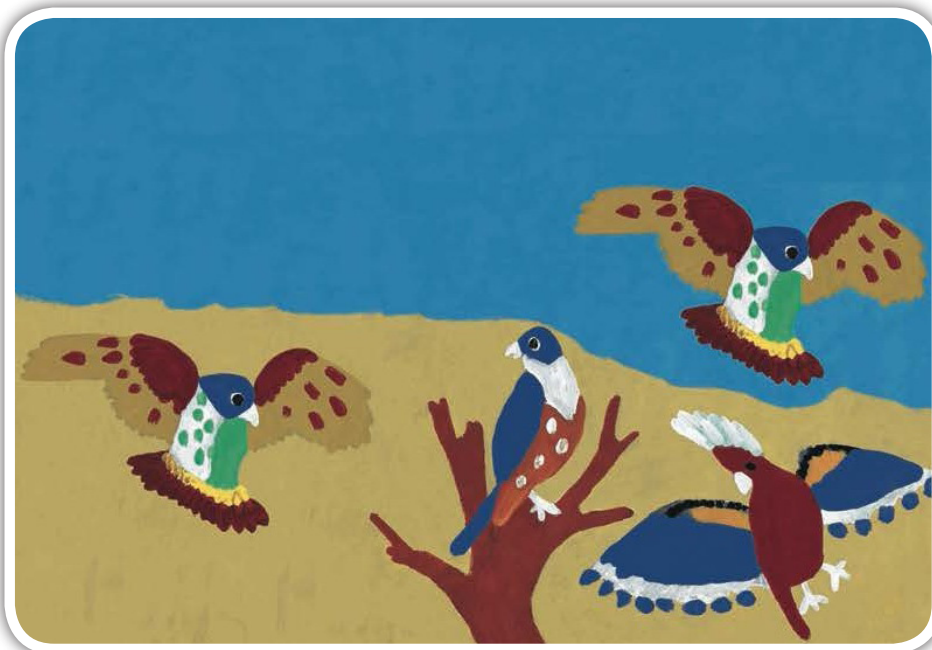


Figure 10: Kukatja child's illustration on the front cover of *The Cocky, the Crow and the Hawk*, Balgo.

4. The Child Artists' Use of Metonymy and Iconography

Adult Kukatja, Ngardi and Warlpiri artists make use of metonymy. Metonymy is key to the visual system that Central and Western Desert artists have developed over eons, and continue to deploy in their artworks, albeit to a lesser extent today.

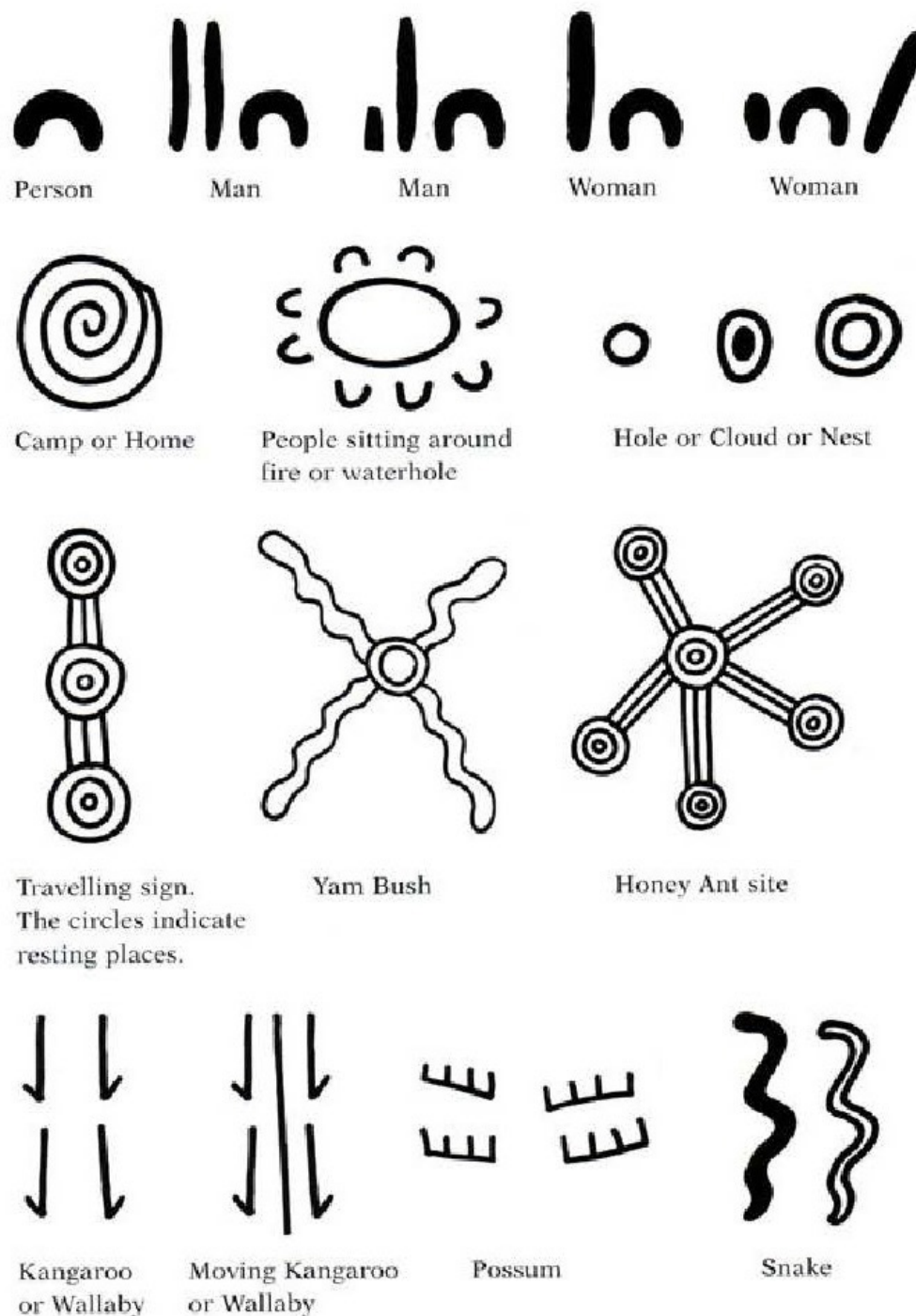


Figure 11: Examples of Central Australian and Western Desert iconography, in which a part (typically a creature's tracks) is used to represent the whole. The visual system is founded upon metonymy. Diagram courtesy of Christine Nicholls, 2004, *Art * History * Place*, Working Title Press, Adelaide, page 15.

Metonymy should be understood as a central element of traditional Centralian and

Western Desert Aboriginal narrative, appearing not only in oral narratives but also in visual art, song, dance and so forth. It is also significant in terms of understanding the epistemological basis of a great deal of other Warlpiri and Kukatja cultural activity, both linguistic and non-linguistic – it is not confined to their approach to visual arts.

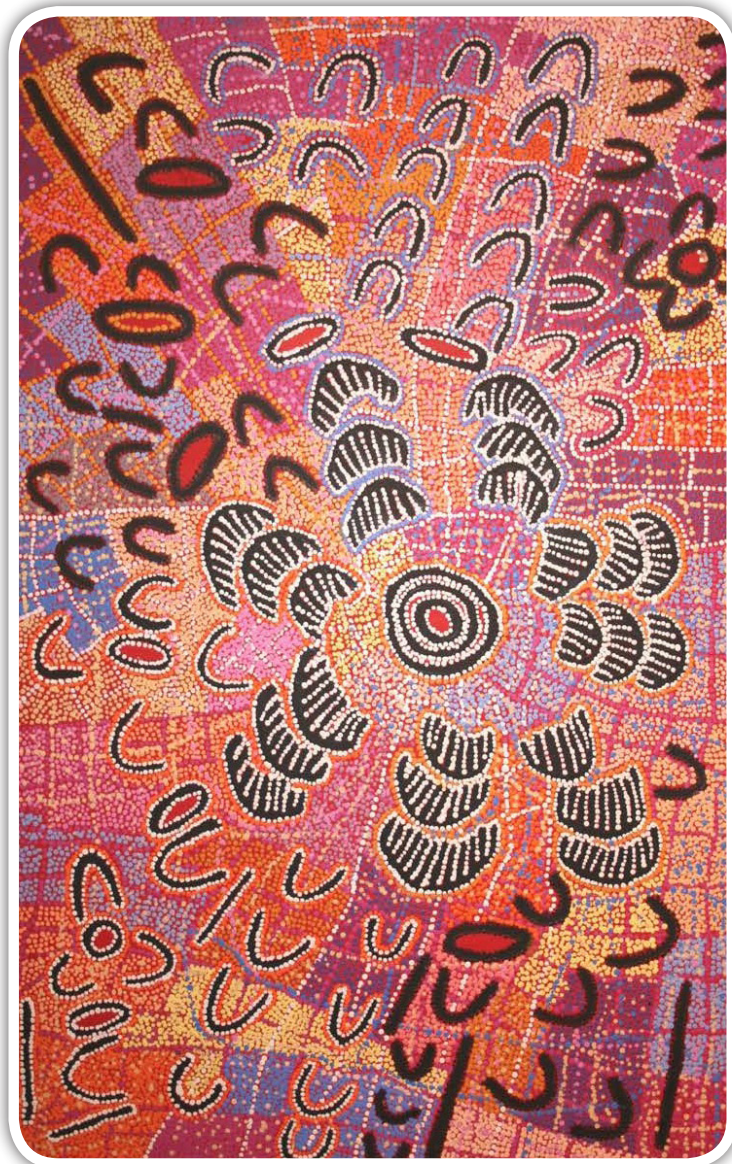


Figure 12: Margaret Napangardi Brown, (adult Warlpiri artist) 2008, *Karnta-kurlangu Jukurrpa* ('Women's Dreaming') acrylic on canvas. In this work Napangardi makes extensive use of the Central and Western Desert metonymic system to portray a large number of women dancing their way across the desert. Also depicted are implements typically used by women: digging sticks and coolamons (concave wooden bowls used for carrying food stuffs, water or babies). Hair string belts used by women when dancing in 'love magic' ceremonies are also depicted in this artwork.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition of metonymy: (1993, p.1760)

...1. The substitution of a word denoting an attribute or adjunct of a thing for the word denoting the thing itself; an instance of this. 2. A thing used or regarded as a substitute for or symbol of something else.

Sonnino has written:

...Metonymy is defined in classical rhetoric as that trope whereby the subject is represented by an adjunct, a cause or a consequence, or any other feature regularly associated with it, or the reverse, whereby an adjunct, cause, etc is represented by the subject. ...Synecdoche, whereby a part stands for a whole or vice versa, is treated by classical rhetoric as a separate trope, but may be more conveniently understood as a sub-class of metonymy.
(Sonnino, L., 1968, p.172; p.184)

Putting it simply, metonymy involves the substitution of one part to denote, or connote, a whole. Metonymy can occur in language as well as in visual systems. Examples of metonymy that are often given include 'the Crown' or 'the Throne' to denote a monarchic system, or 'the Head' to denote the principal person within an institution. Such ideas can also be expressed visually.

Cataldi (formerly Sonnino, L., 1992, n.p.) in her paper 'Metonymy in the Warlpiri Narrative Wapurtarikirli' expands this idea by arguing that the relationship between different Warlpiri media (song, dance, painting, sand drawings and narrative) is metonymic in relation to the Jukurrpa ('Dreaming') as a whole system. By extension, this also applies to the use of metonymy in Aboriginal art across the entirety of the Central Desert and Western Desert.

Cataldi writes:

...the relationship between the different (Warlpiri) media of presentation and the full Jukurrpa narrative is that of metonymy, because as speakers use these different media in order to represent the Jukurrpa, one item in the more limited vocabulary of, for example, the song, metonymically signifies that whole section of the narrative and is so understood.

In relation to Centralian and Western Desert visual art, a particular symbol or iconographic element denoting a part (of a body, bird or animal tracks, etc.) connotes the entirety of the being to which it is attached. Succinctly, this can be described as an abbreviated semiotic system. So, for example, a U-shape, or horseshoe shape will signify a person (or occasionally, a dog), on account of that being the indentation made on sandy ground by a sitting person. The metonymic use of iconographic visual elements is central to understanding the condensed visual system at play in Central and Western Desert artworks.

While the children did not deploy many examples of 'traditional' iconography in their work, there has been a marked decrease in the depiction of metonymic elements in the artwork of their parents and grandparents in recent years, too. No doubt this development is, to some extent at least, market-driven.

Nevertheless, when the children do make use of metonymy, they demonstrate their familiarity with the metonymic system, at least at a simplified level. There is ample

evidence however from the children's artworks that the metonymic system is gradually being eroded in favour of naturalistic, realistic, figurative representations of animals and human beings. There were however exceptions to this, with some children representing human beings in entirely iconographic terms, in line with the older artists in their communities. While the traditional system of artistic representation may be under stress, it appears to be surviving, albeit in pared-down, simplified form.



Figure 13: Warlpiri Child Artist's illustration from *The Pangkarlangu and The Lost Child*, using metonymic elements.



Figure 14: Child Artist's illustration from *The Pangkarlangu and The Lost Child*. The two artworks above signify human presence entirely by using metonymic (see the footprints in Figure 13 immediately above this one) or iconographic representations (in the preceding work the 'u' shapes represent the shapes left by human posteriors sitting on the ground, thus signifying human beings of unspecified gender).

5. The Children's Use Figurative/Non-figurative Elements; Use of the Human Figure in the Children's Artworks

Traditionally, in pre-contact times, sorcery figures like the Pangkarlangu (a large hairy giant who roams the desert killing people and even babies and cooking and eating them, although there are some Warlpiri narratives about unusually benign Pangkarlangu) were always depicted figuratively, unlike other human figures that without exception were represented metonymically, using the Central and Western Desert iconographic system.



Figure 15: Charlie Tjaruru Tjungurrayi, Untitled, (Pangkarlangu) undated, between 1971-1981, synthetic polymer on composite board, 33.6 x 35.6 cm (rounded corners), Image Courtesy of Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, South Australia. Note the Pangkarlangu's dominant appendage – traditionally, the graphic depiction of genitalia is a feature of all sorcery figures, regardless of gender.

Structural continuity is therefore being demonstrated in the depiction of the Pangkarlangu ('monster', or 'sorcery figure') in figurative mode in the children's artworks in *The Pangkarlangu* and *The Lost Child*. The only major difference in the children's artworks that depict these desert ogres is that the Pangkarlangu's monstrous penis is not on view. No doubt his salient appendage has been covered in deference to both the dominant culture's views regarding modesty, and perhaps also as a pre-emptive self-censorious response to the demands of an increasingly sanitized global children's book publishing industry.⁷

7

The children were not instructed to give the Pangkarlangu a daintily modest lap-lap; they were aware however that their artworks could

However, there is a good deal of evidence that, under the influence of the art of the dominant culture, figuration is entering the children's artwork as an important way of depicting human and animal figures, and this may be indicative of impending or actual change in the field of these traditional Aboriginal children's visual arts practice. For example, in *The Pangkarlangu and the Lost Child*, the eponymous child, who in traditional visual arts practice was/is always represented metonymically, is represented throughout the entirety of the book in figurative mode. This is in strong contradistinction with the artworks of elderly Aboriginal people in the same communities, who view such figuration as potentially dangerous to human beings depicted in this way, because of the traditional association of figuration with sorcery practices.



Figure 16: Warlpiri child's illustration from *The Pangkarlangu and The Lost Child*. In 'traditional' artworks the child is represented by a u-shape. Note also the discreet addition of a 'lap-lap' worn by the Pangkarlangu.

potentially become part of commercially available children's books, so there may have been a subliminal dimension to their artistic decisions not to include this significant appendage to their Pangkarlangu figures in this context.

A Brief Comparison of the Differences in the Artworks of Warlpiri, Kukatja and Ngardi Children with those of non-Indigenous children in equivalent age groups.



Figure 17: 11 year old non-Indigenous Australian Child's Illustration. Note the subject matter: an interior that includes figurative representations of a nuclear family. Also note the elementary but reasonably successful attempt to include linear perspective. This illustration is somewhat unusual insofar as all parts of the work have been meticulously coloured – there is no 'blank' space.

To summarize, the remote-area Indigenous children's artworks evince the following attributes, each of which differentiates their artworks from those of most non-Indigenous Australian children. The tradition-oriented Indigenous Central and Western Desert children, whose artworks are the subject of this paper, tend to:

Apply infill to every bit of available space on the page - in almost every one of their works, all of the available space is filled with color. This is an undoubted influence of body painting, where the 'canvas' is the dark brown body. In this, the children have been influenced by the ways in which the older people in their communities create artworks;

Eschew the use of linear perspective and make absolutely no attempt to simulate it;

The foregoing indicates that the Warlpiri, Kukatja and Ngardi children understand space very differently from the way that their non-Indigenous peers understand it (unsurprisingly perhaps since they are reared in desert regions, and even today, live predominantly outdoors);

Eschew the use of light, shade or shadow and make no attempt to simulate these effects;

Avoid proportionate scale (premised on 'western' mathematics) and do not attempt to render it proportional;

Emphasize 'country', that is local cultural and physical landscapes, which often leads to de-emphasizing any human presence – theirs is not a humanistic world-view.

These characteristics sharply differentiate these Warlpiri, Kukatja and Ngardi child artists and their visual artworks from those of their non-Indigenous peers.

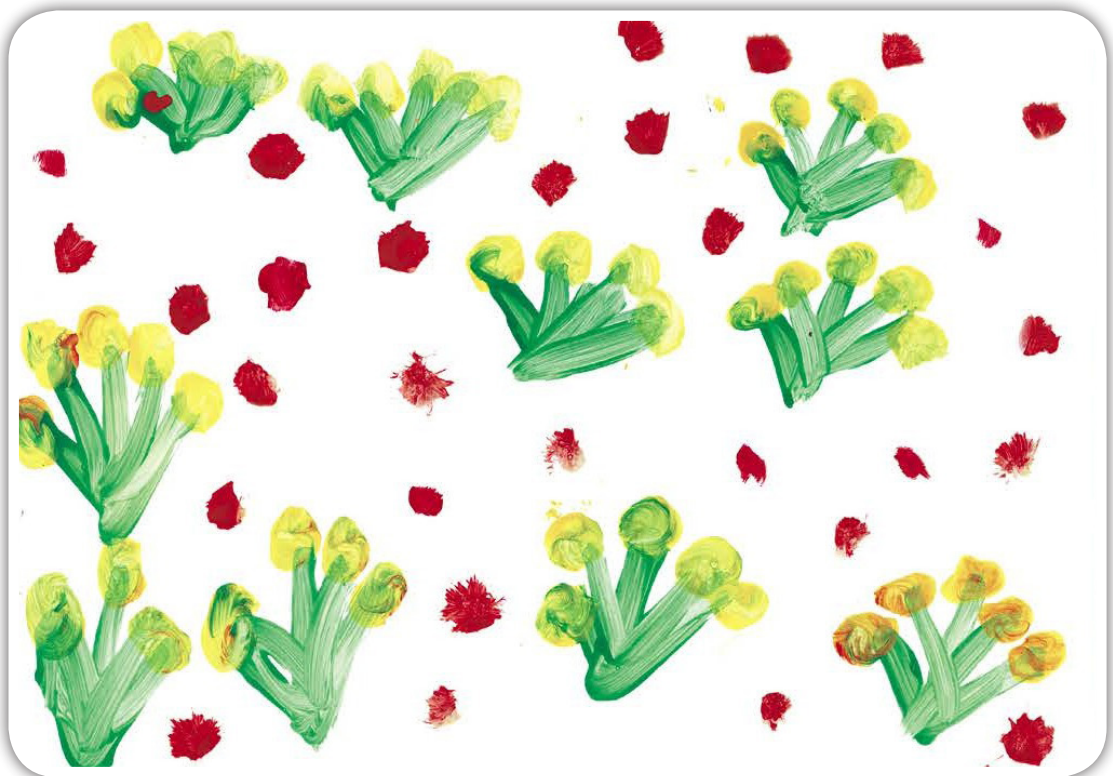


Figure 18: Child's illustration from *The Two Wallabies*. Note that the localised vegetation (bush tomatoes, called wanakiji in the Warlpiri language, and which grow in profusion in this 'country') is the principal and indeed the only focus of this painting.

Future Considerations

An alternative model for understanding the contemporary visual art of tradition-oriented Indigenous children living in desert regions has been presented, which brings with it implications. There are also clear implications in terms of understanding and evaluating the visual artworks of other groups of children whose background is not Anglo-European, and therefore also need to be judged "through the standards of a different procedure", but this is beyond the scope of the present paper - although there is a demonstrable need for further research in this field.

One key difference that emerges differentiating the visual art-making of desert-dwelling Indigenous Australian children and that of children of Anglo-European Australian background relates to differences in their spatial comprehension. This difference, far from being innate, as popular mythology would perhaps have it, is the result of a disciplined early childhood learning process. (For an excellent critique of the populist notion of innate giftedness in domain-specific areas, including visual art, see Howe et al, 1998; and for a more limited critique, Winner and Martino, 1993).

The traditional Centralian and Western Desert early childhood learning process is, however, currently in the process of breaking down, admittedly in some places more than others, largely as a result of the more sedentary existence of Western and Central Desert children today, and because of the assimilatory pressure to which Indigenous peoples are constantly being subjected. The effects of this assimilatory pressure needs further investigation, because it is by no means clear that learning so-called 'western skills', such as literacy, is inevitably premised on loss of earlier ways of thinking and conceptualizing the world.



Figure 19: Nangala, a Warlpiri School Child at Lajamanu, Illustrating The Two Wallabies. Note that one of the changes in the children's art making comparative to that of the older generations is that some (although certainly not all) children made pencil sketches prior to painting their artworks. The older generations never do so. This change is a direct result of primary school teachers introducing this approach into the local schools.

Conclusions

Cognitive diversity leads to artistic diversity and this becomes apparent in the visual art of young, tradition-oriented Indigenous children, even when their approach to painting and art-making more differs somewhat from that of their forebears. In turn, this offers a challenge to the cultural specificity and (often) unconscious ethnocentrism that is brought to the evaluation of non-European art by many 'western' intellectuals, school teachers and others. As a corollary to this proposition, claims of universalism in child art are rejected.

Although at first it may be difficult to pinpoint the precise reasons why this is so, I do not believe it to be possible for non-Indigenous children to have created works such as those of the children whose visual artworks have been the focus of this paper (see Dalglish, 2000). It has been demonstrated that, in general terms, the Indigenous children's artworks comprising the Dreaming Narratives series show a high level of cultural continuity with their elders. In virtually every case, instead of making use of western perspective, gesture or facial expressions or tonal contrasts, the children follow the time-honored examples of their forebears.

There is, however, evidence of artistic and cultural change that is taking place in other areas, although such change is mostly occurring within the broad parameters of 'tradition'. The most significant change noted is in the area of figuration. The children have a much greater propensity to use human and other figures in their artworks than is the case with older artists in their communities.⁸ The move away from non-figurative depictions, whether iconographic or metonymic, is a move towards the dominant Australian culture's artistic norms, which are largely, but not exclusively, of Anglo-European origin. This could, and most probably does, signal further potential, possibly major changes in these Aboriginal children's approach to creating artworks.

At present however, there is a degree of artistic and cultural 'hybridity' evident in the children's artworks. This involves a gradual process of melding or fusion with the artistic practices of the dominant Australian culture.

Ultimately, while on the surface the children's artworks do seem different from those of their elders, they do in fact have more in common with the 'structures of the long run' (Braudel, 1958)⁹ than they do with non-Indigenous children's art or the art of the dominant culture. Indeed, these children continue to make art according to 'the standards of a different procedure'. The question that arises is, however, "For how long is this sustainable?"

Whether or not the unique 'ways of seeing' of these children will survive into the future therefore hangs in the balance. What is certain is that the cultural and artistic mainte-

⁸ As has already been explained, in this regard the children are following the example of many of their older countrymen and women. I would reiterate the point that the move away from Aboriginal iconography based on metonymic principles is largely market-driven, because there is now a distinct preference for non-iconographic Aboriginal artworks in the global marketplace.

⁹ See Fernand Braudel's groundbreaking article, 'Histoires et sciences sociales: la longue durée', (1958) in which he identified the ways in which longstanding social and cultural practices, which he described succinctly as the structures of 'la longue durée', ('the long run') continuing to reassert themselves albeit in somewhat changed shape over a lengthy continuum of time, for more on this concept

nance and survival of traditional Australian visual art is in the hands of these Aboriginal child artists.



Figure 20: Warlpiri School Child at Lajamanu, Illustrating The Two Wallabies.



Figure 21: Warlpiri School Child at Lajamanu, Illustrating The Two Wallabies.

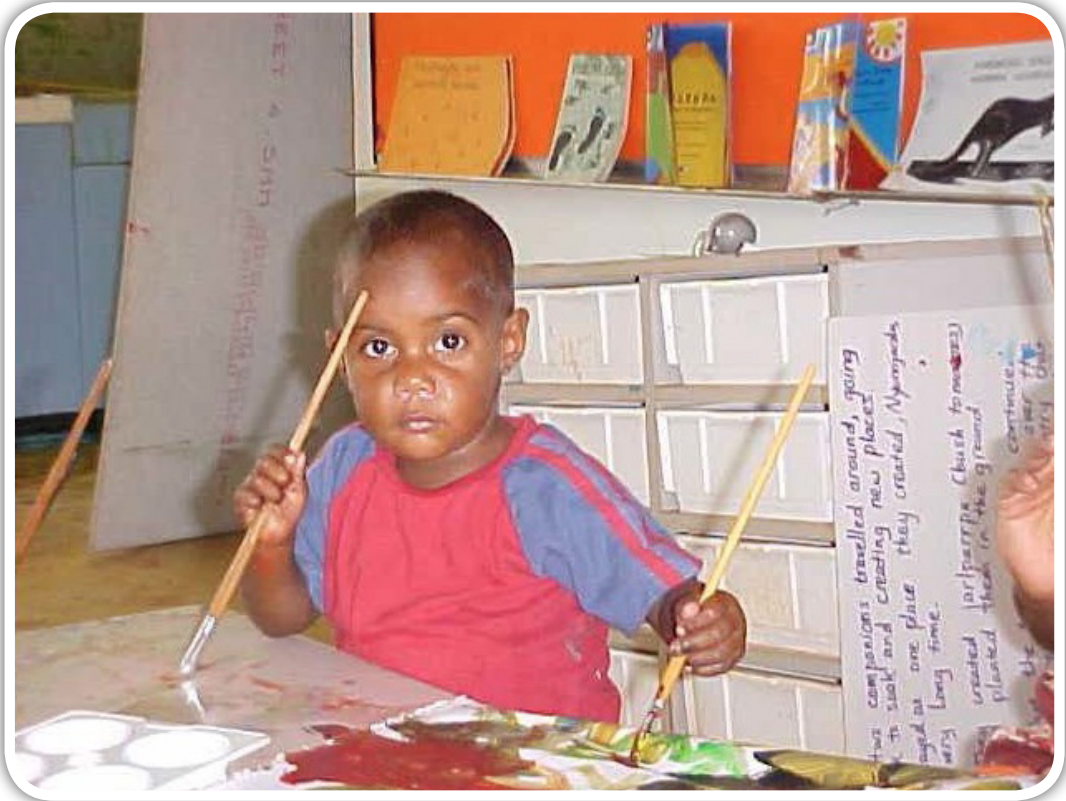


Figure 22: Warlpiri Preschooler at Lajamanu, participating in The Dreaming Narratives Visual Art Project, conceived and led by Christine Nicholls in collaboration with the owners of the Dreaming narratives and the Yapa (Aboriginal) teachers at the schools involved.

References/Bibliography

- Appleton, J. (1984), 'The Perception of Landscape Style: A Cross-cultural Comparison', in *Landscape Journal*, Volume 3, Number 2, University of Wisconsin Press, U.S., pp 91- 103.
- Arnheim, R. (1974), *Art and Visual Perception, A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, The New Version, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London.
- Berger, J. (2008, first published 1972), *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Classic Series, Penguin Books, UK and Australia.
- Braudel, F. (1958), 'Histoires et sciences sociales: la longue durée', in *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 13, p. 725 -753.
- Cataldi, L. (formerly Sonnino, L.), (1992), 'Metonymy in the Warlpiri Narrative Wapurtarikirli', unpublished paper, Northern Territory.
- Dalglish, S. H. R. (2000) 'Utopia' redefined: Aboriginal women artists in the Central Desert of Australia, Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas, University of East Anglia, unpublished PhD thesis.
- Elam, H. J. Jr. and D. Krasner (Eds; 2001), *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Howe, M. J. A, & Davidson J. W. & Sloboda, J. A. (1998), 'Innate Talents: Reality Or Myth?' in *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 21, pp 399-442.
- Levinson, S. C. (2003), 'Space in Language and Cognition', in *Explorations in Cognitive Diversity*, Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.
- Lewis, D. (1976a), 'Route Finding by Desert Aborigines in Australia', in *Journal of Navigation*, 29:1, pp.29-31.
- Lewis, D. (1976b), 'Observations on route finding and spatial orientation among the Aboriginal people of the Western Desert region of Central Australia', in *Oceania* XLVI, no. 4, pp.249-282.
- Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2002), *The Cocky, the Crow and the Hawk, A Dreaming Narrative belonging to Matingali (Bridget) Mudgedell*, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia
- Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2002), *Luurnpa, the Magical Kingfisher, A Dreaming Narrative*

belonging to Bai Bai Napangarti, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2002), *The Two Wallabies, A Dreaming Narrative* belonging to Henry Cook Jakamarra, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2002), *The Pangkarlangu and the Lost Child, A Dreaming Narrative* Belonging to Molly Tasman Napurrurla, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2003), *The Magic Fire at Warlukurlangu, A Dreaming Narrative* belonging to Dolly Daniels Granites Nampijinpa, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (translator and editor) (2003), *The Spotted Cat, A Dreaming Narrative* belonging to Molly Tasman Napurrurla, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (2003), *Art, Land, Story*, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Nicholls, C. (2004), *Art, History, Place*, Working Title Press, Adelaide, Australia

Sonnino, L. A., (1968), *A Handbook to Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric*, Routledge, London and New York

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, (1993), Oxford, England

Winner, E. & Martino, G., in K. A. Heller, F. J. Mönks & A. H. Passow (Eds), (1993), 'Giftedness in the visual arts and music', in *International handbook of research and development of giftedness and talent*, Pergamon, Oxford, U.K.