Owning G.W

Essay:

The painted desert

Author:

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Fitzroy Crossing, in north-western Australia, is a group of settlements set between abrupt scarps of sandstone. The weather oscillates between the furnace heat of the dry season and the lashing rains of the wet, when saturated rocks glow red against lush grasses and wide swags of clouds hang above the flood plain. Even by the harsh measure of the outback it is a remote place – closer to Jakarta than to Sydney.

The town was formed around 1900 and became known as the only place for hundreds of kilometres where the Fitzroy River was shallow enough to be crossed on horseback. The outpost now serves the region's graziers and miners; most of the residents, however, are Aborigines who were forced off their lands by white settlers during the past century. For many years the town was impoverished and unlovely, notorious for the brawls that regularly erupted at the Crossing Inn – and for the carpet of crushed beer cans that spread so far in every direction that it became known as the Fitzroy Snowfields. The tinnies are gone now and the town has begun to achieve a different reputation: it has become home to a thriving community of contemporary artists.

The Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency, an Aboriginal co-operative, is housed in an unprepossessing strip of metal buildings next to a supermarket and a takeaway food shop. The sky was grey on the February day when I arrived for a visit but inside the co-operative two adjoining rooms were abloom with colour. Vibrant paintings occupied every centimetre of wall space and were stacked in piles on the floor, ready for shipment to forthcoming exhibitions in Sydney, Darwin and Perth. A large canvas by one of the centre's best-known artists, Pijaju Peter Skipper, dominated a far wall. The principal colour of the painting is red, in homage to the soil of the artist's birthplace, and the canvas is stippled with dots and crosshatchings that call to mind the patterns of wind on sand or the minute tracks of lizards. Bisecting this elaborate field is a set of darker, more prominent tracks: human ones. The painting is called *Walking Out of Country*, and it is Skipper's lament for the exodus of his people, the Walmajarri, from their homeland in the Great Sandy Desert, a parched expanse south of Fitzroy Crossing.

Not far from Skipper's large painting hung a work by his wife, Jukuna Mona

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Chuguna, a handsome woman whose high cheekbones are framed by a tumble of lustrous curls. The theme is the same – lost country – but whereas Skipper had applied his paint in exact, economical dabs, Chuguna had swept hers onto the canvas in wide gestures that recall the way thick ochre body paint is applied by thumb onto the breasts of women dancers in clan ceremonies. Her work evokes, but does not mimic, the action paintings of mid-20th-century artists such as Willem de Kooning.

In Walmajarri, one of the five Aboriginal languages spoken in the Fitzroy area, a *mangkaja* is a makeshift shelter of sticks and grass thrown up for protection against the rains of the wet season. The Mangkaja agency, which was founded in the early 1980s, got its name because the first art-related structure in Fitzroy was a concrete-and-tin shed by the roadside, which was paid for by a small government grant. It was thought that unemployed and idle Aborigines could carve boomerangs there and sell them for a few dollars to passing tourists. Instead, the Aborigines started painting and became part of a creative revival that has reshaped Australian art and drawn record crowds at exhibitions abroad.

At any time of day, the agency is a bustling place. The atmosphere is part studio, part day care centre, part old people's home. An elderly woman named Dolly Snell sat cross-legged on the floor in front of a one-metre-square canvas, applying thick *rondelles* of yellow acrylic in patterns that resembled sharp blades of spinifex. Her giggling grandchildren played tag all around her, their swift feet sometimes cutting across the canvas, perilously close to the wet paint. Snell didn't appear to mind. In one corner, another artist, Hitler Pamba, captivated an older group of children with an account of his childhood in the desert. (Hitler is Pamba's "station name", the bleak joke of a white boss for whom Pamba once worked as a cattle drover.) Speaking in a mixture of Wangkajunga, Walmajarri and Aboriginal "Kriol" English, Pamba told the children how he had recently visited the region where he grew up, which was dotted with saltpans, the dried-out remnants of ancient lakes. "No one's lived there for 60 years but when I got there I could still see our tracks leading across all that salt to the place where we got water," he said. When Pamba paints, his pictures often re-create this abandoned landscape: opalescent expanses of bluish white are pierced by a green swirl that represents the vegetation surrounding the waterhole.

As Aboriginal painting has become popular with gallery owners, Pamba and the other members of the Mangkaja co-operative are able to sell much of what they produce. This year, the sale of works by Mangakja's 50 painters is expected to bring in almost half a million dollars. The additional income is certainly welcome but it has not alleviated the poverty of the local Aboriginal community of some 1200 people. For this reason, the artists in Fitzroy Crossing began a difficult discussion last year. Perhaps it was time, some suggested, to sell a pair of beloved canvases, *Ngurrara I* and *Ngurrara II*. These densely

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detailed paintings, which are the joint creation of dozens of local artists, are widely considered to be masterpieces. (*Ngurrara*, which means "country" in Walmajarri, is pronounced NUR-ara.) The paintings share surface similarities with Western abstract art – they have the energy of a Pollock, the exuberant colours of a Matisse and the fanciful geometric forms of a Miro – yet they are also intricate narrative works that relate detailed stories about the lives of the artists' ancestors. The sale of these celebrated paintings, experts had said, could bring in a tremendous amount of money.

The Aborigines would not find it easy to allow these singular records of local history to be shipped thousands of kilometres away. Then again, the outback is not an ideal place to preserve fragile works of art. During a visit to a flimsy prefab bungalow near the Mangkaja centre, I had my first glimpse of *Ngurrara II*. "I'm ashamed for you to see how we are storing it," Karen Dayman, who works as an adviser at Mangkaja said to me. The canvas, which is eight metres wide, had been rolled up inside a rough-hewn wooden crate on the bungalow's veranda. This makeshift container had been propped up on plastic milk crates to protect the painting during the monsoon season. Last year, it was endangered by a flood. "The water was almost up to the top step of the house," Dayman said. This year's wet season had begun and, as we talked, a hard rain drummed on the bungalow's tin roof and fell in sparkling curtains around the veranda.

Aborigines have the world's longest continuous artistic tradition. And yet, as Wally Caruana points out in the introduction to his book, *Aboriginal Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2003), it is also the last tradition to be widely appreciated. In 1929, when the surrealists made their map of the world, in which the size of each country was dictated by the degree of its artistic creativity, the Pacific islands, their treasures then only recently appreciated by the Parisian avant-garde, loomed large. Australia rated barely a dot.

Yet Aborigines had painted rock walls 35,000 years before early Europeans decorated the caves of Lascaux. Long before white settlement, the range of Aboriginal creativity was immense. In the far north, groups made elaborate "x-ray" paintings of animals on bark and rock. In the north-west, they adorned cave walls with images of Wanjina, the powerful spiritual beings with huge eyes and no mouths, who observed all things but passed no judgements. When the white explorer George Grey first saw depictions of Wanjina, in 1837, he pronounced them "far superior to what a savage race might be supposed capable of", and speculated that they might have been painted by wandering medieval knights.

Few whites ever saw the more ephemeral art forms of desert Aborigines, such as ground paintings, which were communal works fashioned directly on the sand. They were made during secret rites that celebrated the "creation ancestors" – supernatural

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beings who were thought to have formed every detail of the landscape, from sandhill to river bank. The entire continent, Aborigines believe, was shaped by the prehistoric travels of the creation ancestors; details about these epic journeys were passed down in the narratives known as Dreamings. Each Aborigine inherited responsibility for a particular Dreaming story and the parcel of land on which it took place. In the desert, a ground painting depicting a Dreaming traditionally employed dots of ochre or tufts of plant fibre, carefully placed by the individual who had inherited the right to tell it. Soon after a ground-painting ceremony ended, the image was obliterated. As a result, much Aboriginal imagery remained unknown to outsiders.

There are plant species indigenous to Australia, such as the *Hakea bakeriana*, that bear fruit only after the extreme stress of drought or bushfire. The flowering of Aboriginal contemporary art is a similar phenomenon. The genre's origins are typically traced to the centre of the continent, in Papunya, a dusty village 240 kilometres west of Alice Springs. After the government adopted a policy of assimilation in the early 1950s, nomadic Aborigines were forcibly resettled in Papunya. The government offered the town's black residents squalid housing that was meant to facilitate their integration into white society. In 1971, a white schoolteacher named Geoffrey Bardon arrived in town and discovered a place of disease, violence and despair. Papunya was, he later wrote, "a death camp in all but name".

As part of his instruction, Bardon, who died this year, gave his pupils a small supply of acrylic paint. It was not the students, however, but the town elders who seized upon this new material. Adult Aborigines, still reeling from displacement and facing the threat of cultural annihilation, used the paint to make a lasting record of designs and images that had previously been used only in clan ceremonies. For the first time, the ancient iconography of desert Aborigines was rendered in modern mediums. At Papunya, the pictorial vocabulary of ground paintings was transferred from ochres to acrylics and from desert earth to concrete walls. The graphic symbols have multiple meanings. Concentric circles can represent sacred rocks, camp sites or camp fires. U-shapes signify both humans and spirit beings. (This symbol is derived from the shape left in the sand by a person sitting cross-legged.) Bardon was delighted by what the Aborigines created. He encouraged the artists and brought them boards and canvas. He could not satisfy the Aborigines' demand, however. Within a few months, almost every flat surface in the village, from old fruit boxes to hubcaps and floor tiles was covered with acrylic paint.

Another transformation occurred around the same time, hundreds of kilometres away, in the area south of Fitzroy Crossing. The Great Sandy Desert had been of little interest to white cattle graziers and traditional Aboriginal life survived there well into the 1950s. Skipper and Chuguna, the Mangkaja artists, were both young adults before they

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encountered a white person. Skipper, a self-confident man in his seventies whose salt-and-pepper beard extends to his impressive belly, recalled his first brush with the modern world: walking north to explore the rumoured world of the cattle stations, he saw an automobile. Skipper says he ran and hid in the bush – afraid that the large eyes of the strange beast might be able to see him.

Chuguna recalled a precarious childhood. During the dangerous heat of the dry season, mothers would leave their toddlers in a shady place alongside a water-filled *coolamon* while they foraged for kilometres on the blistering sand, gathering wattle seeds or ant eggs. One year, in the late 1950s, the wet season rains were scant and clan members were unable to store enough seeds and dried fruits to ensure survival. Skipper and Chuguna, who had just married, left home, walking north in search of work on the cattle stations.

The pair faced a second displacement following the equal-pay decision in 1965. Station owners, reluctant to pay higher wages at a time of collapsing cattle prices, sacked their Aboriginal workers and evicted many from the camps on their lands. Aborigines drifted toward the fringes of white towns, which offered little work but plenty of alcohol. Fitzroy Crossing, where Skipper and Chuguna finally settled in 1970, was such a place; Turkey Creek, to the north-east, was another. It was in Turkey Creek that an artistic revival parallel to the one at Papunya began. This time, however, it was sparked by an Aboriginal stockman named Rover Thomas.

Thomas's interest in painting had spiritual origins. On Christmas Day in 1974, when Cyclone Tracey flattened Darwin, Aboriginal elders interpreted the devastation as a manifestation of the anger of the Rainbow Serpent, enraged that white influence had caused neglect of land and rituals. Thomas was one of many Aborigines who reacted to reports of the catastrophe in a metaphysical way. He told friends and family that he had been visited by a spirit who offered him a vision of a new ritual called the Krill Krill. At the first performance of this ceremony, dancers carried wooden boards that Thomas had designed with earth-toned fields of ochre.

Around the same time, a nurse named Mary Macha went to work for the West Australian Government's Native Welfare Department. Her job was to raise money for impoverished communities by selling their crafts. At Turkey Creek she met Rover Thomas, who told her that he wanted to paint. Convinced of his talent, Macha set up a studio for Thomas in her garage in suburban Perth. She would prop his pictures against the fences in the narrow lane behind her house and sell them to anyone she could interest. Eventually, collectors started seeking out Thomas's graceful minimalist work. Painted in natural earth pigments, their creamy browns and blacks evoked the rounded

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rock forms of the Kimberly Ranges nearby.

Wally Caruana, then a curator at the National Gallery of Australia, was among the first connoisseurs to appreciate Thomas's spare and unusual paintings. In 1984, he arranged for the gallery's director to meet Macha. Afterwards, Caruana recalled, the director told him: "You introduced me to a grandmother with a plastic shopping bag, and in it were the most marvellous paintings I've ever seen."

The work had arrived just as there was an audience primed to receive it. "We had learned to appreciate contemporary movements such as abstract expressionism and minimalism, and then suddenly here is this work that has the same aesthetic, yet is loaded with multiple meanings," Caruana said. The visual correspondence between Aboriginal works and modern art was all the more striking, given that artists like Thomas had never studied Western painting.

In 1990, Caruana invited Thomas to Canberra so that the artist could see, for the first time, an extensive collection of modern art. Caruana was walking with Thomas through the National Gallery when he suddenly stopped in front of one painting. "Who's that bugger who paints like me?" he asked. The painting, *1957 #20*, by Mark Rothko, is eerily resonant of Thomas's work.

Thomas, who died in 1998, was quickly embraced by the Western art market. A 1991 painting depicting a waterfall seems to bend the picture plane at the point where the channels of water reach the cliff edge and then cascade downward. To Caruana, the painting "represents the epitome of Thomas's approach". Two years ago, he acquired the work, titled *All That Big Rain Coming from Top Side*, for the National Gallery of Australia, for $778,500. The price remains a record for Aboriginal art sold at auction.

Thomas's success inspired many other Aborigines to paint. In 1992, his sister, Nyuju Stumpy Brown, married Hitler Pamba and settled in a community near Fitzroy Crossing. Brown started to paint her own images of lost country and Pamba followed suit.

A neighbour, Pijaju Peter Skipper, began to make simple works that reproduced *punarrapunarra* – the kinds of repetitive patterns he might once have incised on a shield. Skipper's sustained feelings of exile, however, eventually led to a more profound form of artistic expression. When he describes his work, he uses the Walmajarri words *wangarr* and *mangi*, which have no precise English equivalents. *Wangarr* is the ghost image of someone; *mangi* is a combination of the spirit and the physical trace of a person, which remains discernible even after he or she has left. When whites mined the earth or made roads, Skipper explained, "they scraped the *mangi* off the land", and the essence of the

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past inhabitants was lost. For him, painting was a way to make *wangarr*, or shadow images, of what was now gone, and thus restore *mangi*. Skipper began obsessively painting the waterhole for which his father had been hereditary custodian. Its distinctive quatrefoil shape, rendered in acid greens or vivid oranges, became a focal point in many of his works.

In 1988, one of Skipper's paintings was sent to New York for the Asia Society's exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. The show drew the largest attendance ever at the society and its enthusiastic critical reception began to change the way Aboriginal art was viewed. Although the paintings were informed by thousands of years of tradition, they were hardly folk art. Indeed, the Aboriginal artists seemed rather postmodern: painters like Skipper had cleverly appropriated old imagery in order to create something new.

In 1994, Sotheby's ratified this emerging view by including Aboriginal paintings in an exhibition of contemporary art. Until then, Aboriginal works had always been grouped with ethnographic curios. The paintings attracted bidding from all over the world. Sotheby's department of Aboriginal art has since blossomed; sales at this year's auction reached $7.6 million.

Tim Klingender, the Sotheby's expert who mounted the 1994 exhibit, leads a bifurcated life, travelling between Sotheby's clients – whom he calls "the richest 200,000 people on the planet" – and Aboriginal communities, where the living conditions and the life expectancy rival those in the most dismal outposts of the developing world.

I met him first just before the 2000 Sotheby's auction, as he was showing a painting by the Papunya artist, Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, to a preview crowd at Sotheby's Sydney gallery. In 1996, he said, he had been called in to value works in the estate of a Melbourne artist, Tim Guthrie. This painting, *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa*, had been hanging over the washing machine in the artist's laundry. Guthrie had bought it in 1972 for $150. It was, Klingender declared, "a total masterpiece"; the work's mesh-like layering of stippled dots only partly veiled secret ceremonial objects and symbols that would become fully obscured in later Papunya works. Klingender's sales pitch was effective: Sotheby's had already sold *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* at auction in 1997 for $200,500. At the 2000 auction it sold again to a New York collector for $486,500. Warangkula, who died in 2001, received nothing from either of the sales even though at the time of the first sale he was crippled, partially blind and destitute. Klingender pointed out that the first sale had revived interest in Warangkula's art, allowing him to make a good living in his final years. Klingender also organised a charity auction that raised more than a million

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dollars for a dialysis clinic near the remote community of Kintore where Warangkula died. But the issue of a resale royalty for Aboriginal artists remains a sensitive one every time art sold at auction realises such staggering sums.

Last year, Klingender received a telephone call from Karen Dayman, the adviser for the Mangkaja co-operative. The artists in Fitzroy Crossing, she said, were considering selling one of the *Ngurrara* paintings. Klingender says his initial reaction was dismay that the works might leave the community. The *Ngurrara* canvases, he said, were "among the greatest works of indigenous art ever created"; moreover, they had a powerful political significance for the people of the Great Sandy Desert.

In 1992, the Mabo decision first recognised the right of Islanders and Aborigines to claim legal ownership of their ancestral lands – provided that they could show evidence of an enduring connection with them. Frustrated by their inability to articulate their arguments in courtroom English, the people of Fitzroy Crossing decided to paint their "evidence". They would set down, on canvas, a document that would show how each person related to a particular area of the Great Sandy Desert – and to the long stories that had been passed down for generations.

Ngurrara I, the first attempt, was a canvas that measured five by eight metres and was worked by 19 artists. It was completed in 1996. But Skipper and Chuguna, in particular, didn't feel that it properly reflected all the important places and stories, so more than 40 additional artists were enlisted to produce a more definitive version. In 1997, *Ngurrara II*, which was eight by 10 metres, was rolled out before a plenary session of the National Native Title Tribunal. It was, one tribunal member said, the most eloquent and overwhelming evidence that had ever been presented there. The Aborigines could proceed to court.

The case, however was caught up in a logjam of similar cases contested by mining and farming interests. Meanwhile, many of the elderly artists who had worked on the *Ngurrara* paintings were living out their last years in poverty. Several died.

Dayman phoned Klingender to ask if he would come to Fitzroy Crossing and explain the mechanics of an auction sale to the artists, so that they could make an informed decision. In their conversation, Klingender and Dayman discussed how a sale might affect the community's stalled land claim. "The work is so significant that a government institution will almost certainly want to try to buy it for the nation and that would be ironic, because the nation has yet to acknowledge the claim," Klingender said. He was troubled by the thought that such significant paintings would leave the control of their creators – and be lost, as the land had been, to future generations. Yet he concluded that a sale would ultimately benefit the community, not least by exposing its creativity to an international audience.

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In February, Klingender and Wally Caruana made the long journey from Sydney to Fitzroy Crossing, and I went with him. The flight to Broome took eight hours. We then headed east in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. A few kilometres outside Broome, the road called, in a typical display of wishful outback thinking, the Great Northern Highway, turned into a meagre, one-lane sliver of bitumen, frequently submerged by sparkling freshers of water that peeled backward, like breaking waves, against the vehicle's immense wheels. The mangrove coast quickly gave way to the *pindan* - vast, unpeopled stretches of black buffle grass and golden sedge punctuated by tall termite mounds. After half a day of driving, we arrived at Fitzroy Crossing.

The night before the meeting to discuss the fate of the paintings, Klingender drove from Fitzroy Crossing to a settlement 16 kilometres away called Bayulu where several of the most prominent Mangkaja artists, including Skipper and Chuguna, live in bleak, unpainted concrete-block houses; their glassless windows barred in response to break-ins by local drunks and drug addicts.

In such communities, the earnings of someone like Skipper, who paints irregularly and might make $30,000 in a good year, are divided and shared by an extended family, many of whom have no income beyond welfare cheques. Skipper and Chuguna also have community responsibilities that limit their artistic output. Skipper, as an elder, is often called away on secret ceremonial business. Chuguna teaches the Walmjarri language at the community school and is informal guardian and carer of a number of young children.

A sign at the entrance to Bayulu proclaimed that no alcohol or gambling was allowed in the settlement but as Klingender's vehicle churned up the muddy road, scattering packs of skinny dogs, several outdoor card games were in progress. Skipper was engrossed in one of them. The artists' houses were as modest as those of their neighbours but many of them had used their extra income to purchase refrigerators and washing machines, as well as four-wheel-drive vehicles. Klingender told the artists about the next day's meeting and offered to arrange transport for those who needed it.

The sale of the *Ngurrara* paintings would bring the biggest windfall yet to the area. That evening, Klingender returned to Fitzroy Crossing and discussed the paintings with Dayman over a dinner of barramundi she'd caught in the nearby river. He noted that *Ngurrara II* was particularly valuable. "I don't think you should and I'm not advising you to, but if you do sell the big one, I estimate that you'd realise between a million and a million and a half."

The next morning, the artists who had created the *Ngurrara* paintings gathered inside an old mechanic's shed in Fitzroy Crossing. None of them was younger than 60,

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some looked impossibly frail, leaning on the arms of younger relatives or labouring through the mud in wheelchairs. Inside the shed, a slight stench of old motor oil mingled with the scent of drying paint and human sweat.

After some discussion, a *wangki*, or decision, was reached. *Ngurrara II* would stay, for now, in Fitzroy Crossing. But as the sun beat down on the tin roof and rising humidity made the shed's interior feel like a baker's oven, a consensus emerged that *Ngurrara I* – which Skipper referred to as "that little shorty one" – "might be a 'little freer' ".

The artists decided to take a fresh look at *Ngurrara I*, which many of them hadn't seen in years. It took three people to carry the canvas and several more to unroll it over the dingy carpet that covered the workshop's earth floor. Suddenly, the shed was filled with the colours and forms of the desert: swirls, dots, concentric circles, serpentine curls. A strong, dark line with circular protrusions bisects the canvas: it represents the Canning Stock Route, a series of wells sunk by white settlers in the early 1900s for the convenience of inland cattle drovers. At the base of the painting – to the south-west, if you view the canvas as a map – Hitler Pamba's saltpan country spreads out in his characteristics opalescent wash. The gestural swirls of his wife, Stumpy Brown, depict the waterholes that abut the livestock path to the east. Just above, Skipper's signature quatrefoil, its acid green the brightest hue in the composition, draws the eye upward, cushioned by Chuguna's more muted, less structured ovals. The sinuous curve of a snake spirit defines the top of the canvas.

The elderly artists began slowly walking across the canvas, pointing, their voices rising with excitement. To anyone versed in the "Don't touch" conventions of Western art, the sight of people walking on a masterpiece – in mud-crusted stock boots – was startling. It was also a reminder of how non-Western and non-materialistic Aboriginal society remains. After the artists had a chance to reacquaint themselves with the painting, Dayman introduced Klingender, who she said worked "for a mob called Sotheby's", adding: "That mob is looking around all the time for anything that they might be able to sell."

Klingender rose to his feet. "If you want to sell this painting here, I will take this painting, get a stretcher made for it, photograph it and put it in a book like this one," he said, brandishing a glossy auction catalogue. "Then I'll take the painting, put it on a airplane to New York and put it up on a wall there in an art gallery, then back in an airplane to Sydney and to Melbourne."

As a translator repeated Klingender's words, Skipper, a veteran of city exhibitions, interjected his own elaboration. "So people can see 'em," he said to his fellow artists. "So they can know that thing and get it into their brain, 'Right, I want to buy that thing'."

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"After we show it," Klingender said, "people who've seen it will all come together and try to buy the painting or call us on the phone and say, 'I'd like to give so much' and someone else will say 'I'd like to give more'. It's a competition and the winner gets the painting."

A painter named Tommy May, who as a stockman had delivered cattle to livestock auctions, offered his own analogy. "Just like selling a bull," he said.

"Exactly," Klingender said. "This painting is a number-one breeder bull." Klingender explained that the buyer might be the National Gallery of Australia or a foreign museum. "It might be just one person who'll put it in his house," he said. Laughter erupted at the thought of any one person having a house big enough for such a painting. "I don't know anyone with a house that big," said Dayman, "but Tim might know a few."

Klingender explained that if the artists wanted the painting to stay in Australia he could sell it with that stipulation. "But the money would be less. Either way, if you want to sell it this year the decision has to be made soon, so it can be put into the book."

Skipper stood up and said that he was worried about how much the painting would fetch. There were murmurs of assent around the room and reminiscences about other sums that had come and gone with little lasting effect. Chuguna voiced this financial concern as well. Her tone then shifted and she used the word *ngalkarla* - which means a familiar sound or a rhythm heard from a distance. In this context, it meant, "spreading the word": if the painting was widely seen, it could convey to outsiders the enduring ties that exist between the artists and their land.

After further discussion, the artists concluded that they wanted to get more than $20,000 for the painting. Klingender smiled. "We're on safe ground there," he whispered to me. His estimate for *Ngurrara I* was about $300,000 and, since Sotheby's had decided not to charge its usual commission, the artists would receive almost the entire sum. Because auction results are uncertain, especially with a unique work, Klingender did not share his estimate with the group. He simply said that he thought their expectations would be met.

A brief, desultory discussion continued, mostly in Walmajarri. People walked around the painting. Someone spilled a glass of cordial on it. Chuguna wandered outside and gazed up at the gathering clouds. "Big rain coming," she said. "Got to get back to Bayulu and look after them kids coming home from school." Suddenly, without a vote or any dramatic declaration, the artists told Dayman they had reached a decision. The *wangki* was that the "little shorty one" was free to go.

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There was indeed big rain coming. A cyclone moved close to the coast that night, deluging roads and closing airports. After three days of being immersed in the world view of the Walmajarri, I wondered briefly if the snake spirits were angry about the artists' decision to sell the painting. Apparently not: the cyclone didn't cross the coast. We made it back to Broome before the Great Northern Highway became inundated.

Two weeks later, *Ngurrara I* arrived in Melbourne, where Sotheby's restorers cleaned every centimetre of the canvas with water and ethyl alcohol. "They said they couldn't believe what came off it," Klingender told me. "Buckets of red mud." The canvas was gently ironed flat and then placed on an elaborately engineered stretcher: a new black border was added to mask the work's irregular edges. Klingender rented the Museum of Contemporary Art, an art-deco building opposite the Opera House at Sydney's Circular Quay, for a glittering pre-auction showing. The auction itself took place on July 28 in Sydney and a West Australian entrepreneur bought the painting for $213,000.

In Fitzroy Crossing, *Ngurrara II* awaited a different fate. As *Ngurrara I* was readied for display before the art world's elite, the big canvas went on display in the bush. The Aborigines – the old artists and their young descendants – decided to take the painting on a journey back towards the lands that it depicted. Last April, about 30 Aborigines set off from Fitzroy Crossing in a convoy of battered trucks and four-wheel-drives. They made camp in a sandy bend of river on Cherrabun Station, the vast cattle property where Skipper and Chuguna had first encountered white people almost half a century ago. In the bright sunlight of a clear morning, the canvas was unfurled on the ground. Among the artists who had come on the journey was Spider Snell, who, at just under 80 years old, is an elegant and surprisingly vigorous dancer. Snell is the custodian of an important ritual dance, the Kurtal ceremony, which is performed while carrying long, thread-wrapped boughs that represent the rain clouds controlled by the snake spirits. Accompanying him were three young apprentice dancers, boys who usually attend boarding school south of Perth, thousands of kilometres away. For three days, the old man shared his stories with the young ones – stories of dreaming, of water, of survival, and of a past kept alive for them in the thick swirls of paint beneath their feet.

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