Darby Jampijinpa Ross (1905-2005) had a constant drive to communicate the certain ways he saw the world from his camp at Yuendumu, a remote community in the Tanami Desert. Always with the conviction that Warlpiri ways should be considered alongside non-indigenous ways, in order to survive and prosper, he did so with a sense of irony in the knowledge that younger generations were no longer learning what he was taught. He was concerned that knowledge systems he embodied were being left behind in the wake of television, Toyota’s and takeaway. Regardless of medium, he did not waver from his message, and it can be found in recordings of the 1950s, documentary films of the 1960s and 1970s, and in more recent television programs like ‘Bush Mechanics’ and ‘The Bush Tucker Man’.

Although he never considered himself an artist – there is no Warlpiri word for ‘art’ - another important strategy he adopted was the painting of kurawarri (designs associated with country) for Jukurrpa (Warlpiri intellectual property). This extended to his role as a founding member of Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association in the mid 1980s, only the second art centre following on from Papunya in 1970-71. For many decades previously, he had facilitated ground, sand and body painting during ceremonial business, and when new materials became available Darby was quick to exploit them for his purposes. His foray into painting with the full spectrum of acrylic paint colours began when he was around the age of 80, and can now be regarded as an innovative and significant contribution to Australian art and culture. Darby Ross never had a solo exhibition of his painting across two decades, and this project presents the first survey of his practice.

A Griffith Artworks and Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association project.
DARBY ROSS
JAMPIJINPA
Make it good for the people

A Griffith Artworks and Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association project.
It is with great pleasure that Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association brings this important exhibition of beautiful and significant paintings by Darby Jampijinpa Ross, in collaboration with Simon Wright and Griffith Artworks at Griffith University, to audiences in Brisbane and Alice Springs.

We are especially grateful to the major supporters of this project, HOCA and NEWMONT. Dr Paul Eliadis and Dr Michael and Eva Slancar of HOCA (Haematology and Oncology Clinics of Australasia) were generous donors toward the publication, while Mr Paul Davis, Community Relations Co-Ordinator for Newmont Mines, Tanami Operations, generously supported the tour of this project between Brisbane and Alice Springs.

Darby Ross was one of the founding members of Warlukurlangu Artists and one of the most significant painters to have ever consigned work through the art centre. We hope this exhibition will continue to build for Darby, a respected Warlpiri elder and humanitarian, the recognition he so richly deserves.

Everyone who met Darby immediately fell under his charm. He was not only an amazing painter but someone who worked tirelessly throughout his life to reach out to white Australia, to generously share his culture, to try and find common ground, and foster mutual respect. In trying political and social times his philosophy seems particularly relevant today, just as it was under his guidance.

Otto Jungarrayi Sims, Chairman WAAAC
Cecilia Alfonso, Art Centre Manager

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The title of this project was lifted from one of Darby’s oft-repeated sayings, and in the contexts of his Warlpiri upbringing and Christian faith would appear not to favour one “people” over another. Perhaps it was a directive, or hope, balanced between the “it” of whatever one set out to achieve, and “good” in relation to a collective betterment. Given his actions and words over several decades it took on the powerful aura of a mantra, guiding philosophy, or design for living. His vision, to borrow freely any way or means to communicate, and graft onto it a desire to prosacut Warlpiri ways, became a design that was a necessary and traditional way of survival, not only within but between various cultures. Despite incredible adversity, including the loss of family members at the Coniston Massacre of 1928, and worrying that others might not agree with his strategy, he made it a life’s ambition to uphold faith in it throughout his 100 years.

Darby’s pluralistic and collaborative practice evaded the binary white/other discourse prevalent in art and cultural discourse. Accordingly, this exhibition seeks not to overlay Darby with a dominant “other” curatorial logic, but rather, to recognise value in his own views alongside divergent opinions. In light of the myriad viewpoints and expectations of various stakeholders, both from within Darby’s community and also beyond, to have not done so would have risked isolation of the artwork from important personal, familial and social contexts, and largely ignored the artist’s own pluralistic philosophy.

Jampijinpa negotiated and capitalised on opportunities to broadcast personal and Warlpiri perspectives time and time again, over several decades. Across varying formats, from as early as the 1950s right through to just before his passing in 2005, Darby accepted active roles as an informant in documentary films, or consultant to expeditionary and scientific recordings, and had several influential television roles. He was the inspiration for the celebrated ABC TV program “Bush Mechanics”, and provided on-screen and behind the scenes contributions to another ABC production “The Bush Tucker Man”. Hosted by Les Hiddins, Darby’s knowledge and articulation of food and medicinal sources, found throughout the arid Australian interior, was revelatory for mainstream audiences.

Image: Darby Ross at Juka Juka, near Yuendumu.
Courtesy National Archives of Australia. AG135,K3/11/89/48
Research facilitated by Darby’s friend and biographer Liam Campbell was also a cornerstone to this project. The chapter on Darby’s painting in their collaboration, “DARBY: One Hundred Years of Life in a Changing Culture” (produced in 2006 by Warlpiri Media Association and ABC Books), was revisited by Campbell for this project. As the work of Campbell made clear, the problem with writing about Darby’s painting, or in approaching him to talk about it, was always that he was all about the Jukurrpa. Darby appeared not at all interested in talking to Campbell about style, colour, influences, changes, or the art market — those other ‘extra’ things that may have been of interest to consumers of his art. In the end, Darby’s Jukurrpa. The fact that it provided additional income and a place to socialise was a bonus.

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Darby’s painting was therefore a way for him to enjoy, celebrate, share and document his Jukurrpa. The fact that it provided additional income and a place to socialise was a bonus. Darby Campbell, correspondence with author August 2008

Liam Campbell’s research elaborated Darby’s belief in the priority of Jukurrpa (designs signifying content) and Jukupurrpa (intellectual property often referred to as ‘dreaming’) in each of his actions. In the formulation of his identity and legacy, by his own estimation, Darby Jampijinpa Ross was not simply an artist, and nor was his first priority ‘art’. Yet, in terms of the way he constructed and proliferated a personal viewpoint for audiences of all kinds, he was a unique talent who regularly performed cultural and creative tasks across a range of platforms to communicate meaning.

Acknowledgement of that provided a rear vision mirror for this project, and kept in perspective the nature of the issues raised whenever apparently safe terms like ‘art’ were being used. An awareness that ‘art’ did not have an equivalent translation in Darby’s language, nor the baggage it carried, was especially relevant in the context of his instrumental roles at Yuendumu Men’s Museum in 1971, and Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association Warlukurlangu around 1985. These entities were established to service the community, but then morphed to become responses to market constructs of art and cultural tourism. The Men’s Museum folded after a few years, but the art centre has kept up constant renegotiation with internal and external demands. It has become one of the community’s most important sites of education, social mobility and income generation. Like Darby’s painting, the art centre is an important strategy designed to be read as a determination to communicate — via any agency — the sustainability of community and cultural objectives.

AN INTRODUCED MEDIUM

Apart from documentary images of bodily and ground Jukurrpa, Darby made, the earliest recorded images by Darby are a set of drawings on paper done in the 1960s for the American scholar and anthropologist Nancy Munn. It is interesting to note that almost 25 years before he took up canvas and acrylic paints, and 10 years before the advent of the Papunya Tula Artists cooperative in 1971, Darby’s eye for colour, line and movement had fused these fundamental components into what would become his signature painting style.

What had happened at Papunya is instructive for an understanding of later events at Yuendumu. Papunya was a construct of government policy, a place that attempted to concentrate and homogenise several different groups from distant regions. Amid undercurrents of tension and dismal squalor in the early 1970s, a group of senior men painted a major school mural, and then paintings on portable surfaces using introduced materials.

The content of the first paintings, along with their styles and palettes — a spectrum of ochre reds, yellows, browns and black — facilitated a fervent debate. For the next decade people in Papunya and in communities throughout the Central and Western Desert regions considered the implications of what and how to paint. Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association arose partly from the willingness to resolve that debate, through the actions of a group of women and then the Yuendumu Doors project in 1983. So, by 1985, Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association at Yuendumu had become only the second cooperative established. An account of those events is outlined in Darby’s biography elsewhere in this publication.

It is therefore no coincidence that paintings made at the inception of Warlukurlangu Art Centre recalled the range of earthy tones seen in Papunya painting from the early 1970s, and in much larger Papunya canvasses of the 1980s. Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, another important founding member of the Yuendumu art centre, had been in Papunya at that time and had played a role in the apparent beginnings of the acrylic painting movement there. His central role in the creation of the Yuendumu Doors 10 years later was a major catalyst for other senior men such as Darby Ross to take up painting and this arguably altered the course of the movement.
A GRAMMAR OF COLOUR

The earliest painting by Darby sourced for this project, Yankirri Jukurrpa (circa 1985-6), was a canvas board executed prior to the incorporation of the Association in 1986. A larger canvas, Yankirri Jukurrpa (1988), featured a huge mob of emu ancestors and range of ochre-based colours, in keeping with many early works by fellow founding members of the Yuendumu art centre. Yet Darby was also one of the first to abandon earthy ochre-based tones. He became integral to the way an explosive spectrum of colour was adopted in acrylic paints at Yuendumu in the mid 1980s. The introduction of the full acrylic paint colour spectrum is something now almost taken for granted, given the number of communities that began to paint with similar materials afterward, and who are now well known for it — but, in fact, the popularity of acrylic colours radiated out from Yuendumu, to Lajamanu, Balgo and onward.

Robin Granites, a painter and resident of Papunya, recalls the ease with which Darby picked up and recommended synthetic polymer paint colours at the Warlukurlangu Art Centre during the 1980s:

The only colours we used to have was a few like red ochre, it was a deep brown, with white or yellow ochre, and black from charcoal. Someone asked Darby at school, "Hey, why are you using that purple one?" And he said, "Sssshhhhh, white man’s new technology!" He had no problems with the new colours and he loved it. He just wanted to play around on the canvas using these white men’s colours for his stories, true ones for the country. But when it was for business, like ceremonies outside, it was proper colours only for ground painting — the four colours he’d started with as a kid. When he was doing the ceremonies he was the emu ancestor, he’d paste red ochre on his face and use feathers to become the emu, and dance like nobody. He made that choice between colours for his business, and colour for paint.

Robin Granites in conversation with the author, August 2008.

Granites recalled early works by Darby that oscillated between the so-called Papunya-palette and work that experimented with an expanded range of colours. The fourth work attributed to Darby in art centre archives was Watijarra (Two Men) from 1987, an early biographical work that alluded to Darby being taught by his father about the family’s country. It was closely followed by Yankirri Jukurrpa (1987), an important work consigned to Gabrielle Pizzi Gallery in Melbourne and acquired by The National Gallery of Victoria. Choices were made often along aesthetic lines – whatever looked good – but also deliberately, referentially. In works related to Ngapa (water), the narratives associated with soakage country east of Yuendumu, his use of white and black often alluded to clouds, high and white, or low, dark and rainy. The large and impressive Ngapa Jukurrpa (1987), a promised gift to the National Gallery of Victoria, recruited both and is a rare example of a work that also incorporates figurative elements to signify the central character, ‘Walura’, a gecko. Pigments of white, powder blue and black further connect us to elemental forces, such as a friendly wind that would rush from clear blue skies to assist the unheard movement of a large blacksnake hunting prey, seen in work such as Warla manu Warna Jukurrpa (1989).

Watiyawarnu Jukurrpa paintings relate to the seed bearing tree (Acacia Tenuissima) found during travels in spinifex and mulga country at the site of Mt Leibig. The resonant lime green lines in Watiyawarnu Jukurrpa (1993) indicate the immature stage of the seed’s development. At that point it was regarded as best suited to being ground by stone, mixed with water to form a paste, and used as medicine for upset stomachs. A related work, Watiyawarnu Jukurrpa (1995) referenced the seedpod at a later stage, where it was bright orange and yellow, ripe, ready to be picked and cooked. Those a little less ripe were greeny yellow.

Pamapardu Jukurrpa was Darby’s version of the flying ant story, and often depicted central termite mounds. In one of the excellent examples from the collection of The National Gallery of Australia (1992), the ants became short black bars, arranged in plague proportions. Or again, in the second version from the same year, the tessellated slabs of colour imitated the frenetic swirl of flying ants gathered within slow moving ‘clouds’.

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Hues of blue were often an aspect of paintings that featured ‘Old Man Lungkarda’, a blue-tongued lizard ancestor associated with the epic bushfire and subsequent creation of the Warlukurlangu site. Lungkarda is referenced by the symbolic use of blue tones in Wati Jukurrpa (1990), Liwirringki Jukurrpa (1990) and a painting of the same title from 1996. Long black lines were the dramatic aftermath of fires that scorched paths across country depicted in those works, seen to great effect in the Liwirringki Jukurrpa (1997) a painting held in the Warukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association Collection.

In other works, such as Ngapa Jukurrpa (1993), a kaleidoscopic approach to colouration was deployed to conjure feeling or sensation, as with the animation of a particularly chaotic storm character. In the largest canvas he painted, Ngapakurlangu (1989), he created the sense of a massive body of rainwater as it flowed creepily over vast terrain, into and around sites as if anthropomorphically possessed of a mind of its own. Darby’s dexterity with colour as a way to indicate spatial depth, changing perspective and movement was perhaps taken to greatest effect in the work Karlanjirrinpirri (1994), where a flock of bush swallows were tracked as they noisily twisted and careered through the country.

On the last paintings Darby made, such as Yankijirri (1999), he pared back his colours dramatically. Gone also was in-fill, the coloured blocks of dots apparent in so much of his earlier work. This minimalism in the formal elements of the work was countered by the colours selected. Juicy hot reds, twilight mauves and sunny oranges thus leap out from the black ground of the canvas, resonant with ripeness of bush raisins and currants. The main concern was to highlight, indeed isolate, the kuruwarri. These vibrant, coloured dots that usually occupied the gaps among the symbolic shapes and forms became less important: he content to lay down only the barest elements that constituted meaning. Yanduuru artists, via their art centre and staffers, have continued to market their unique contributions to Australian indigenous art in terms of jukurrpa, colour, and collaboration, three things synonymous with Jampijinpa.

Warlpiri painters based outside Yuendumu, such as Michael Nelson Jagamara and Robin Granites, have also held the work of Darby Ross in high regard, and cite him as a source of inspiration among peers and young people:

A big talker, with powerful stories, he was one of the last ones who knew old time ways and he had those stories. He’d lead dancing, get all painted up and then teach them all the proper ways. Old Darby, old ‘Kurundi’ to his friends, he was named that way because of the station he was a drover on, and a mailman for, I think. He was one of the strongest painters, we shared a story, Pamapardu, the flying ant, and that was one of his best ones. But he would also look at things going on and make a painting out of that. Like things in the community, like animals and weather, season, or birds flying across. He was good for connecting them to the law, old stories. He had a lot of respect and was more or less like a chief. Every tribe used to know him and he could talk to them. He spoke Warlpiri, Pitjarara, Luritja, Waramungu, pidgin, English – everyone could understand him. I’d see him doing his painting for Warlukurlangu and he was the number one painter for a while. He’d sit with them old people, the two Paddy’s, Shorty Jangala, and then he’d go around the schools and tell the kids about painting, take them out

Liam Campbell’s work highlighted what Darby and some of the local art centre members spoke of in their discussions of his strength as a painter. Within that small group of senior members of the community he is still regarded in terms which equate him roughly to a Yuendumu version of a ‘painter’s painter’. This context is significant, as each painting’s real value for Darby and his fellow painters was in its representation of jukurrpa. These senior men with authority in the community would debate and vouch for the accuracy of the associated symbolism, informed by their unique vantage point and accumulated knowledge. Darby was evidently always a busy person, but he sought to balance whatever was going on with an enduring attachment to the art centre. Visiting and working there was a social and intellectual exercise among friends and rivals, and much debate could be had about the strength of law in particular works, or the right way to approach the fine line between withholding or disclosing aspects of each piece.
TWO PEOPLE, OR MORE: ONE WORK

Artists from Yuendumu are famous not only for their use and innovation with colour, but for the production and promotion of collaborative practices. Art Centre records have shown that Darby sometimes painted alongside his wife, Ivy Napangardi Poulson. Excellent examples of collaborations between the two, such as the National Gallery of Australia’s work titled Pamapardu Jukurrpa (1992), or the small Ngapa Jukurrpa (1991) revealed the extent to which her contribution could be rendered.

Darby also collaborated with master printmakers, such as Basil Hall, in order to execute some of his last works. Each of his four graphics related to the primary ancestral subject of Yankirri (emu). A wonderful set of works, from the restraint of Ngipiri (1999), with its representation of a mother with her eggs, to the bold simplicity and swirling centrality of Yankirri (2001), is complemented by the artist’s only figurative depiction of an emu in Yankirri manu Ngapa (1999). The final edition, titled Yarlukari Jukurrpa, was a silkscreen work comprised of 12 acetate sheets and took almost two years to collate. It was printed in two states, where the second, a larger edition, adopted a different order of colours.

Yuendumu is also known internationally for its massive collaborative paintings from the 1990s. In order to create these works only certain people in the community were entrusted with the crucial role akin to “director” or “production manager”. They oversaw proceedings to ensure strict adherence to law and custom while, amid great energy and fanfare, up to 30 people worked on the canvas. Darby Ross was sometimes called on in this regard, and Yarrangkiny Jukurrpa (Cockatoo Creek), a huge work painted at Yuendumu in 1996 now in the South Australia Museum, was a good case in point. The four Jukurrpa stories shown in that work were authored by Samson Japaljarri Martin (kirda or owner of the Jukurrpa), Paddy Japaljarri Stewart (kirda) and Darby Jampijinpa Ross (kurungurrungu or ceremonial manager), while twenty-five people painted the work.

Perhaps the most highly visible example of Darby’s role in this capacity was courtesy of a film, held in many collections around Australia including Griffith University Art Collection. Titled Jardiwarnpa: A Warlpiri Fire Ceremony (1993), it featured all aspects of a ceremonial cycle, including the conception and development of a massive painting almost six metres in length, now in a distinguished overseas collection. According to its makers, the Jardiwarnpa film documented ceremonial practices of Warlpiri participants over two weeks, with apparently minimal intrusion by the film crew. Its observational style was interspersed with Darby Ross speaking to camera or in voice-over. Researched and written by Marcia Langton, a respected authority on Indigenous culture and Aboriginal representation, the cultural protocols observed in Jardiwarnpa were an example of how documentaries were being generated by Indigenous elders in their attempt to pass on traditions to younger generations: The orchestration of ceremonial actions in the film challenged the concept of Indigenous culture as stagnant. The coaching of the performers as they participated in the ritual is an important observation. The elders who moved alongside the performers, and shouted instructions, was a revelatory moment as Indigenous cultural practices were shown as being emergent, evolutionary, and marked by constant change and improvement. The dominant view, of Indigenous culture as non-changing, was disrupted by those scenes, and instead, Indigenous cultural practice was presented as vibrant and living, intense and intentional.

He is estimated to have figured in the painting of around 200 works, whether as an individual, partner or collaborator. His work at the art centre, where records of around 125 paintings were archived, was by far the most consistent in terms of quality materials and outcome. Prior to Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association, he painted on various materials as gifts or swaps, like boomerangs, parajas and small boards. Few of these were recorded, and many have been lost or have lost attribution of his authorship. Up until his ‘retirement’ in 1999, Darby sometimes painted ‘outside’ the community, in the company of other artists, or solo. One example, correctly attributed as a collaboration between Darby and an unidentified male artist, was the large Untitled (Ngapa maru Muru / Water and Wallaby) painting of around 1990. In that work his lineal water elements were combined with wallaby tracks, a story only another male was authorised to reference. The final element considered was his involvement in many of the famous Yuendumu collaborative canvasses, funded by the art centre, and now in significant public collections.

In the production of this project there were several crucial viewpoints: from the artist, from within the community and from a non-indigenous appreciation of his life’s work. The sum of these can perhaps now lay claim to Darby’s contribution to contemporary Warlpiri and Australian culture as being significant and enduring. Those expressive facets of his life that sought to express Jukurrpa and kuruwarri, including what non-indigenous people call his art, cross-referenced his demonstrable conceptual power and visualisation of intellectual property in myriad ways.

Darby’s regional standing as the custodian of important sites and the intellectual property associated with them was greatly enhanced by his awareness of the mediums that became available to him. His discretionary adoption of colour and use of symbolism were to become major ways of communicating with external, non-Warlpiri, realms. The small number of subjects he painted and executed in print-media, and his preference for quality over quantity should never be considered as a limitation, but as a fractional contribution toward the extraordinary array of appropriated mediums he used to communicate objectives. While painting might unravel pastimes and cultural practices, it might also be appreciated for times to come, regardless of what we might think of him as an artist.

He stopped painting when he was in his mid-nineties, not due to failing energy or willfulness, but from waning eyesight and the realisation that he required the care afforded by a respite home. Across two decades of painting, and his inclusion in some of the most important group exhibitions of Australian indigenous painters here and internationally, Darby Ross never had a solo exhibition. This is partly due to the sporadic nature of his output, and the fact that often he would complete only one work at a time, or a couple, which upon entering the art centre for documentation would be acquired by a visitor or shipped to any one of a number of galleries around Australia or abroad. Yet it was also because his most active painting periods coincided with the then accepted policy of the art centre to promote painters in the community as a group rather than as individuals. He was also actively involved in the planning and conception of content and labour divisions for the massive community canvasses. Like many things in the community and art centre, that policy, and the opportunity to collaborate, has changed. Many of the most successful artists today regularly hold solo shows.

Darby’s was not a quest for ‘the perfect painting’, so often associated with minute variations on a theme, work done in series or repetitive formal resolutions. In looking at his entire body of work – including what he painted - and its apparent cohesiveness over time, it is more probable that Darby sought out ways to say the same thing differently, rather than different things to say the same way. We are proud to present Darby’s role in Australian contemporary culture as one of the most significant Warlpiri contributions to date.
As an artist, Darby was not as concerned with painting for market expectations as with communicating the Jukurrpa of his paintings. His early works resemble Warlpiri ground paintings, although he didn’t restrict himself to a ‘traditional’ ochre palette. Darby developed an enthusiasm for bright colours. His canvases were filled with pinks, yellows, greens and blues; but it was the kuruwarri that held the story, the imprint of Jukurrpa upon the landscape, that was at the heart of every painting.

Darby’s commitment to the stories that his paintings depicted was evident in the way he spoke about the Warlpiri landscape. Standing amongst a group of nondescript rocks and spinifex, Darby would declare, through word and song, his ‘country’. The hills around Ngarlikurlangu came alive with his stories. He named the rocks, pointed to a particular tree that was important, a place that was to be avoided, or another to be visited and maintained. He would also point to the places where people used to live, collect water, or where ceremonies were once performed. It was in this context that Darby would ‘story’ the Jukurrpa - the yankirri (emu) dancing at Yankirri, the ngapa (floodwater) covering the country at Jinjirriwarnu, or the fire that chased the two Jangala men from Warlukurlangu – and translate them to canvas.

These are the stories and the country that Darby would paint: Yankirri (Emu), Pamapardu (Flying Ant), Liwirringki (Burrowing Lizard), Yakajirri (Desert Raisin), Watiyawarnu (Acacia Seed) and Ngapa (Water). They were the kuruwarri that formed the basic design of his canvases; each one just a small part of a much bigger story. Sitting outside the art centre, he would often sing and tell these stories as he painted. He would become animated, using hand gestures and sound effects. With paint dripping on the ground, his arms outstretched, Darby would mimic the flight of the giant bush turkey, pointing dramatically in the direction of its flight.

Darby’s enthusiasm for what his paintings represented further endeared them to art buyers. He passionately related the basic elements of his paintings to visitors, often pointing out they were only part of a much larger Jukurrpa that travelled across Warlpiri country, the details of which were known to him. When visitors returned, Darby would often remember them and, if they were interested, might relate further details of a particular painting. Susan Congreve, art coordinator in the 1990s, recalled Darby’s enthusiasm to connect with a wide range of people:

He remembers details about people. I’ve never met someone so respectful and courteous and interested in what other people have to say. Often when people came into the art centre, they started off with the ‘what was your life like’ kind of thing to Darby, and they would end up telling Darby their life story...
In the 1990s, Darby lived with his wife Ivy in a besser brick flat between the mission house and the art centre. He would shuffle over each morning for a cup of tea. It was a ritual enjoyed by all the old men. The art centre was their place, and removed from the day-to-day politics of the community. If someone brought in some boomerangs to sell, they would want to hold them, rub their hands down the sides, and pass judgement on their quality. If a freshly painted canvas arrived, they would watch and listen as the artist told the story to one of the workers. Once the artist left, the man would either tell the art coordinator that the artist hadn’t got the story quite right, or give it the thumbs up: ‘Really strong Jukurrpa that one!’ For the old men like Darby, Jack Ross, Paddy Sims, and Paddy Stewart, the painting’s inherent value was always its embodiment of their stories so that young people will learn them and become close to the old people and their traditions through the Jukurrpa.

Each day the men would join the women on the back veranda and paint. Jack would sit with his dogs and sing as he painted the kuruwarri with a brush. Paddy Stewart would grind his teeth and rock back and forth as he applied dots with a little stick. Paddy Sims’ grandchildren would watch him lay out the sides, and pass judgement on their quality. If a freshly painted canvas arrived, they would watch and listen as the artist told the story to one of the workers. Once the artist left, the man would either tell the art coordinator that the artist hadn’t got the story quite right, or give it the thumbs up: ‘Really strong Jukurrpa that one!’ For the old men like Darby, Jack Ross, Paddy Sims, and Paddy Stewart, the painting’s inherent value was always its embodiment of Jukurrpa.

On the last ones he did paint, Darby was always concerned with the kuruwarri; the vibrant, colourful dotting that usually filled his canvases was less important, and he was content to lay down only the story. Darby’s last works for the art centre were a series of etchings, a screen print and a few of these ‘kuruwarri’ canvases.

By retirement, Darby had produced over 120 documented paintings for the art centre. He exhibited extensively, and many of his works are now held in major public galleries and collections around the world. He left a lasting record of his country and its Warlpiri language and social relations, the lack of ceremonies, and the changing priorities of the community. While there remains a great deal of respect for older people and a willingness to learn from them, young people do this with competing interests and obligations. While the older men and women like Darby pass away, there remains a community of people who maintain a strong Warlpiri identity and continue to paint Jukurrpa. But, as Darby was fond of saying, they are walking a different road.

The art centre is important as a place where this knowledge is valued, and where the older men and women have the opportunity to pass it on to the young people. But, many of the older people lament the loss of the more complex elements of Warlpiri culture and social relations, the lack of ceremonies, and the changing priorities of the community. While there remains a great deal of respect for older people and a willingness to learn from them, young people do this with competing interests and obligations. While the older men and women like Darby pass away, there remains a community of people who maintain a strong Warlpiri identity and continue to paint Jukurrpa. But, as Darby was fond of saying, they are walking a different road.

When he was old, he was still active. He always walked around. He told stories to young people. If you listen to old people, they’ll pass that knowledge to you. Old people, they’re really wise. If you listen to them, you’ll follow their footsteps. You’ll be like them. It’s important to listen to old people like Darby.

Adapted for this project by Liam Campbell from ‘DARBY: One hundred years of life in a changing culture’ Warlpiri Media and ABC Books 2006
The Jukurrpa associated with Yarlukari (to the west of Yuendumu) tells of Yankirri (emus) who came from the east and travelled through Yarlukari to Mikanji. They were travelling through dry land until they reached Yarlukari. Darby often painted Yankirri dancing around waterholes, and much of the content of the story is private, for men only. Another site of Yankirri Jukurrpa is Ngarlikurlangu, north of Yuendumu. Often Yankirri are shown coming to find water from the rock hole that is there. Emus are represented by their Wirliya (footprints), the arrow like shapes that show them walking around Ngarlikurlangu eating Yakajirri (bush raisin). There was a fight at this place between a Yankirri and a Wardilyka (Australian Bustard, Ardeotis australis) over sharing the Yakajirri. There is also a dance for this Jukurrpa that is performed during initiation ceremonies. The Yankirri Ngipiri Jukurrpa (emu egg Dreaming) is associated with the Ridukari site south-west of Yuendumu. It is a men’s story, much of it is kept secret from the uninitiated. Ridukari is an important ceremonial site for men of the Jampijinpa/Jangala subsection who are the ‘kirda’ (custodians) for the site and its associated Jukurrpa. Yankirri survive on a diet of native vegetation found in the area, including the ‘yakajirri’ (bush raisin, or solanum centrale) and ‘mukaki’ (plumbush, or santalum lanceolatum). Yankirri are sometimes seen emerging from the cave (‘pirnki’) and laying ‘ngipiri’ (eggs) at Ridukari. Eggs and flesh are keenly sought after and highly valued food sources.

Courtesy Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association archives.
Yankirri Jukurrpa (Emu Dreaming) 1987
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
121.2 x 91.4 cm
National Gallery of Victoria
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria
with the assistance of Lauraine Diggins, Fellow, 1987
0.35-1988

Watjirra Jukurrpa   1987
Two Men Dreaming (152/87)
acrylic on canvas
61 x 76 cm
COLLECTION OF FELICITY WRIGHT, S.A

Yankirri Jukurrpa  c.1988
Emu (337/88)
acrylic on canvas
77 x 90 cm
COLLECTION OF JUNE LAURIE & JOHN MCMINLEY

Yankirri Jukurrpa (Emu Dreaming) 1987
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
77 x 90 cm
National Gallery of Victoria
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria
with the assistance of Lauraine Diggins, Fellow, 1987
0.35-1988
The rainwater Dreaming belonging to Jampijinpa covers territory out to Hapeleke, and involves the creation of many sites along the way. Each concentric circle can represent a specific place. In the major painting Ngapakurlangu, the journey started at Warlura, East of Yuendumu. Warlura is also the Warlpiri name for gecko. A Warlura ancestor's footprints were filled with rainwater from a large cloud at Lapakura and Warlura, creating the rockholes at these two sites.

The Dreaming took place near Warlura, a hill West of Yuendumu, and is Warlpiri for gecko. The next site on the way was Warlanjarra, another hill, where the rain reached flood proportions. In the centre of Ngapakurlangu, the water reached flood proportions. Then on to Wilpirri, another hill, where the rain reached flood proportions. The Dreaming track goes on to Warankurlpu, a hill West of Yuendumu, and to Yinjirriwarnu, another rockhole, where the rain reached flood proportions. In the centre of Ngapakurlangu, the water became flood proportions. Then on to Kuntiwarnu, another rockhole, where the rain became flood proportions. The next site is JukaJuka, a large rock formation said to have been left behind by the KurduKurdu Mangkurdu (children of the Rain Dreaming, or young clouds) who camped there one night. Juka Juka is a spectacular site near Yuendumu where pointed boulders erupted out of the earth and now jut towards the sky.

Courtesy Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association archives.
Warlpa Jukurrpa
Wind and Snake Dreaming (368/89)
acrylic on canvas
61 x 76 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

Ngapa Jukurrpa
Rain (159/89)
acrylic on canvas
152 x 61 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION, MELBOURNE

Ngapa Jukurrpa
Water (358/87)
acrylic on canvas
211 x 90 cm
COLLECTION OF PETER & THEODORA TOYNE, ALICE SPRINGS
PROPOSED GIFT TO NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA

26 27
Liwirringki Jukurrpa is closely associated with Warlukurlangu (bushfire) Jukurrpa, and involves the sites of Mikanji, Pujupujarlpa, Wanjiyarla, Piwarla, Yajurlu, Manjapanta, Kurkaparnta, Parpinparnta and Niagaraalingi. A major part of the story is about an old man who was living at Yajarlu, a soakage west of Yuendumu. A number of men were camped at the site, conducting maliara ceremonies (bush high school). The old man were looking for young man and went to dig yams to feed them. Once they were fed, the young men went hunting for liwirringki and kangaroo to give as ritual offerings. To hunt the liwirringki they spread out fire with ngiji (fire sticks). The fire chased everyone, including the liwirringki out of their burrows, so they could be killed by the men with mutu (small clubs). Streams of dust were left behind them as they ran, fleeing across country to escape the fire and mutu. Then the young man came back to Yajarlu and put the meat in the fire to cook it and eat it. In many paintings of this Jukurrpa men are depicted as ‘U’ shapes with ngiji (fire sticks) beside them and can be shown lighting fires beside mulju (water soakages). ‘E’ shapes represent the tracks of the liwirringki. Long lineal tracks can also represent the dragging of liwirringki’s tail, or penis (ngirnti) across the ground, the slow burning fire front (kurnamurra) or burnt tracts of land after fire. Large concentric circles may indicate the burrows where the skinks lived.

Courtesy Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association archives.
Pamapardu is the Warlpiri name for flying ants or termites. They build large mounds out of earth and their saliva, known as mingkirri, which are found commonly throughout Warlpiri homelands in the Tanami Desert. Heavy rains occasionally flood the underground chambers of the mingkirri, forcing the pamapardu to leave. Naturally anticipating this seasonal occurrence, the ants grow wings and fly off in search of new dry nests. After a flight of plague proportions, and having found safe mingkirri, their wings drop off. The ant grubs are at this stage eaten by goannas and collected by women for food as they are very high in protein. Grass is collected in handfuls and lit. The mingkirri is then broken open with digging sticks and as the grubs come streaming out they are finished with the burning grass. This process kills and slightly cooks the pamapardu, and they are placed in parrajas (hollowed containers), so any excess ash can blown off before being eaten. Short coloured bars often represent the pamapardu in various stages of maturity travelling between and circling the mingkirri. The roundels can also represent Jukurrpa sites along the path taken by pamapardu ancestors.

Courtesy Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association archives.
Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1992
Flying Ant Dreaming
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
61 x 152 cm
Gift of the Australian Government, Canberra, 1993

Ngarlkirdi Jukurrpa 1992
Witchetty grub (155/92)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION
Walyawarnu Jukurrpa 1994
Wattle Seed (245/94)
acrylic on canvas
150 x 76 cm
COLLECTION OF JENNY HILLMAN
Courtesy Waterhole Art, Sydney

Liwirringki Jukurrpa 1995
Burrowing Skink (10/95)
acrylic on canvas
183 x 61 cm
SUZANNE O’CONNELL COLLECTION, BRISBANE
Courtesy Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane
Karlanjirringi Jukurrpa        1994
Swallow Dreaming (206/94)
acrylic canvas
76 x 18 cm
COLLECTION OF ROSLYN PREMONT, SYDNEY
Courtesy Gallery Gondwana, Sydney and Alice Springs
Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1995
Flying Ant Dreaming (205/95)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 46 cm
COLLECTION OF HELEN READ, DARWIN
Courtesy Didgeri Art Tours and Palya Art

Liwirringki Jukurrpa 1996
Blue Tongue Lizard (253/96)
acrylic on canvas
76 x 46 cm
LAVERTY COLLECTION, SYDNEY

Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1996
Flying Ant Dreaming (161/96)
acrylic on canvas
76 x 61 cm
LAVERTY COLLECTION, SYDNEY

Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1997
Flying Ant (179/97)
acrylic on canvas
61 x 76 cm
COURTESY OF LIAM CAMPBELL, YUENDUMU

Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1998
Flying Ant (179/96)
acrylic on canvas
76 x 61 cm
LAVERTY COLLECTION, SYDNEY

Pamapardu Jukurrpa 1998
Flying Ant (179/96)
acrylic on canvas
61 x 76 cm
COURTESY OF LIAM CAMPBELL, YUENDUMU
Jarli Jukurrpa 1996
Frog Dreaming (199/96)
acrylic on canvas
152 x 61 cm
THE PAUL ELIADIS COLLECTION OF
CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART, BRISBANE

Liwirringki Jukurrpa 1997
Burrowing Skink (210/97)
acrylic on canvas
183 x 76 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION
Untitled c.1990s
acrylic on canvas
106.5 x 76 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION
Gift of Felicity Wright

Ngapa Jukurrpa 1997
Rain Dreaming (88/97)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 76 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

Yakajirri Jukurrpa 1999
Bush Raisin Dreaming (87/99)
acrylic on canvas
151 x 46 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

Yankirri and Yakajirri 1999
Emu and Bush Raisin (296/99)
acrylic on canvas
183 x 46 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

Yakajirri Jukurrpa 1999
Bush Raisin (164/99)
acrylic on canvas
183 x 46 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION
a Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

b Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu eggs (12/99)
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
TARA LECKEY COLLECTION, DARWIN

c Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu (111/99)
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

d Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu (138/99)
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

e Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu (170/99)
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

f Yankirri Jukurrpa 1999
Emu (183/99)
acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 cm
WARLUKURLANGU ARTISTS
ABORIGINAL ASSOCIATION COLLECTION
Darby Jampijinpa Ross was born in the bush at Wakuwura, near Ngarlyi-Arlangu, the present site of Yuendumu, around 1905, before non-indigenous people were prevalent in central Australia. He referred to it as ‘the time before tea, flour and sugar’. He grew up with traditional ways, traversing vast tracts of his ancestral country, hunting with his family. He was taught about subtle nuances in the region’s landscape, in weather patterns and ways to locate food and water, and participated in regular ceremonial events.

His ancestral country lay to the north of Yuendumu and his jukurrpa included: emu (yankirri), ngapa (water), and pamapardu (flying ant) but he also painted liwirringki (blue-tongue, or burrowing skink) and watiyawarli (wattle and acacia seed). He was kirda (owner) of several important sites, including Juka Juka, a site related to ngapa (water) and his responsibility as a rainmaker.

In 1928 members of his family were killed during the Coniston Massacre, an infamous event where up to 100 indigenous people died. Coniston had, for centuries, been a soakage where people came for water, but by the 1920s it had become the most western pastoral outpost in severely drought affected country. Competition for water and food, the treatment of indigenous people, cattle poaching and reprisal killings resulted in the last recorded massacre in outback Australia. Darby survived the Coniston Massacre and began to travel widely as a stockman, earning the nickname Kurundi, after a cattle station he worked on, and sometimes as a mailman throughout remote country.

From the 1950s Darby played an important role in the introduction and wider acceptance of indigenous knowledge systems and related intellectual property. He was fluent in many languages, including Warlpiri, Luritja, Pitjantjara, Anmatyeri and Waramungu, which greatly assisted English translations. He was also an occasional primary source in recordings where he participated as a collaborator, informant and consultant for scientific, geographic and anthropological expeditions throughout the region. Recordings from the 1960s held in the National Archives of Australia feature his contributions to flora and fauna studies. He can be seen and heard in documentary films and recordings by The Parks and Wildlife Commission, and is cited in important research conducted by leading scholars such as Nancy Munn and Eric Michaels.
For several decades Darby Ross was also an important emissary for communal religious affairs, largely responsible for general acceptance of the Baptist Church in Yuendumu. He assisted with the construction of the church building, created a stained-glass kuruwarri (design) for its windows, and adapted passages from the bible so they allowed for greater acceptance of Warlpiri perspectives.

Darby Ross was arguably Australia’s first indigenous curator. During the 1960s he was given “visiting curator” status at the South Australian Museum, and was then instrumental in generating the motivation of community members to conceive and construct from local materials the Yuendumu Men’s Museum, which opened in 1971. On the walls inside the Museum, Darby Ross painted a major mural in acrylic paints, along with other men who were to become instrumental in the acrylic painting movement at Yuendumu. Darby was its first Curator and hosted public programs, educational tours and demonstrations. The Men’s Museum was a storage repository for sacred objects which had important historical associations to ceremonial traditions. The Doors were removed in 1995 and are now housed in the South Australian Museum.

As a much respected Warlpiri elder Darby became a founding member of Warlukurlangu Artists Association. It began formal operations in 1985–6 following a few years of gradual momentum sparked by the Doors project. He painted there and regularly exhibited in group shows until “retiring” in 1999. His paintings were significant for their immediate adoption of bold colouration, gestural combinations of lineal, dot and ‘mosaic’ elements and their strength of Jukurrpa (dreamings) that described over 200 Warlpiri and Anmatyerr sites for the benefit of young children receiving an education steeped in non-Warlpiri traditions. The Doors were removed in 1995 and are now housed in the South Australian Museum.

The art movement officially began in the community in the early 1980s. Among the first activities was a concerted effort by women who had painted small works and sold them in order to raise funds to buy a Toyota so they could more easily access remote sites of significance. Then, in 1983 the school janitor Paddy Japaljarri Stewart became the catalyst for the now famous “Yuendumu Doors” painting project at the school. He’d been in Papunya in the early 1970s and took part in the “Honey Ant Mural” school project, often attributed as the beginning of the acrylic painting movement. Thirty school doors were painted by Paddy and five other men, who embellished them with twenty-seven Jukurrpa (dreamings) that described over 200 Warlpiri and Anmatyerr sites for the benefit of young children receiving an education steeped in non-Warlpiri traditions. The Doors were removed in 1995 and are now housed in the South Australian Museum.

During the 1970s he took part in major literacy programs at the local school, and published stories in Warlpiri which were photographed so younger members of the community could learn to read and write their own language with their own intellectual property. As an active advocate of the Warakurna Tribal Council during the 1970s, he would consult with non-indigenous courts and judges about how to negotiate consideration of Aboriginal law during proceedings, at roughly the same time of his involvement as a traditional owner and claimant over Land Title.

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During the 1970s, he would consult with non-indigenous courts and judges about how to negotiate consideration of Aboriginal law during proceedings, at roughly the same time of his involvement as a traditional owner and claimant over Land Title.}

Darby was thought to be the oldest Warlpiri man alive, lending weight to his claim as “the oldest man in the world”. He passed away in Alice Springs in 2005. In 2006 a major biographical monograph, ‘Darby: One Hundred Years of Life in a Changing Culture’ by Liam Campbell, featuring the photography of Scott Duncan, was published by ABC Books and Warlpiri Media, distributed by Allen and Unwin. Before he passed away Darby was thought to be the oldest Warlpiri man alive, lending weight to his claim as “the oldest man in the world”.
COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
South Australian Museum, Adelaide
Australian Museum Sydney
The Paul Smit Collection of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
The Lowry Collection, Sydney
Durband Karhik Collection, South Australia
Musee National des Arts d’Occident, Paris, France
Kelton Foundation, California, USA
Kiau Foundation, USA
Art Gallery and Museum, Kielce, Kielce, Poland
Donald Koh Collection, Low Art Museum, University of Miami
Aboriginal Art Museum, Uluru, Holland (Collection of Thomas Vroom)

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Donald Kahn Collection, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami
Duncan Kentish Collection, South Australia
The Laverty Collection, Sydney

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Adelaide Town Hall (Pacific Arts Symposium), Adelaide
Musee National des Arts d’Occident, Paris
Awake To The Dreamtime, Kelton Foundation Collection, Canada
The San Diego Museum of Man, USA
Musee National des Arts d’Occident, Paris
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Art Award, Old Parliament House, Canberra
Musee des Arts d’Afrique et d’Oceanie, Paris
Duncan Kentish Collection, South Australia
The Laverty Collection, Sydney

1985 'Mythscapes', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
'Australian Aborigine Art', Australian Museum Sydney
'Songlines Aboriginal Art', Songlines Aboriginal Art Gallery, San Francisco, USA
"Fighting for Culture", Indigenart, The Mossenson Gallery, Perth
'Luminoz: Contemporary Art from the Australian Desert', A Manly Art Gallery & Museum
"Kurruwarri: Peintures aborigines du Desert du Tanami", May, essay by Yolande Vivaldi-Hautefeuille
"Cockatoo Creek", South Australian Museum, Adelaide
"Open Doors", Aboriginal Art Museum, Grafton Regional Gallery, Grafton Regional Gallery, Tamworth Regional Gallery, Bundiora Art Centre
"Cross-Section", a collection of works from the stockroom, Northern Editions, Darwin Regional Gallery, Bundoora Art Centre)
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1999 Morphy, H. and Boles, M.S. (eds.), Art from the Land, University of Virginia Press, Virginia, U.S.A.
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