

Divine Geometry (Reflections of an art advisor)

Sitting on a stone wall outside Rob's café in the mall at Alice Springs, making light conversation with some friends about the heady days when Aboriginal art exploded into the world from Central Australia. I was remembering back to the days when I first became an art coordinator in the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr homelands, a place most people know simply as Utopia.

My wife and I and our two sons arrived at Ampilatwatja community in an old blue Holden. My wife was to take up a teaching position at a small outstation called Irrultja, a sixty kilometre drive each day, across the Sandover river, out into sand hill country. Jana had asked to go to one of the most remote communities when considering a teaching position with the Education department. Our hope was to find a very traditional community where the people still followed the old ways. My expectations, if I had any, were to finish writing my book and to learn more about Aboriginal culture. So with our two boys and some rough directions we set out from Alice Springs and as we turned off the Plenty highway onto the Sandover Highway I felt an excitement or perhaps a premonition. I was on a path I was meant to travel.

I didn't know it then, but I would become the art coordinator for a hundred and twenty artists, mostly women, who spoke little or no English; a pinhole in a vast empty desert. It was a steep learning curve and not without its traumas. Every few weeks I had to drive the seven hundred kilometre round trip into Alice Springs to do our shopping, often on a wing and a prayer. Soon the old blue Holden looked sad; the Sandover highway had killed many a car.

In the beginning this strip of naked highway felt like a great unknown snake in the wilderness. But now, like that old blue Holden, I know every bump and dip, every car wreck, every tree and rock. I am also aware of whose country, (in Aboriginal terms) I'm passing through. This piece of dirt road has become part of me and I dream about it in my sleep sometimes; it divides my life like white and black.

I have travelled it when it was more like a raging river than a highway. There have been times when I thought I couldn't drive another mile, wanting to give up and drown as the rain poured down and tiny gullies became raging torrents in a matter of moments. The road simply disappeared and driving seemed insane. More frequent were the days when I stopped and got out to soak up the beauty of the country after rain or to pick some wildflowers, I even have some favourite trees along the route I used to sit under.

A year after our arrival at Ampilatwatja I was asked by the Women if I would be their art coordinator to replace Cassie Kreymborg who was heading back to Melbourne with her family, after her husband John's teaching stint. Desart, an association for community based art centres, held a meeting at Ampilatwatja with the artists. I wasn't allowed to attend, I had to wait under a tree outside. After the meeting everyone came over to me with big smiles and clapped, I was now the new art coordinator. Cassie had said to me before she left "You have to watch the money story with Desart Narayan, it seems a little bit dodgy." And so I started. I had a roll of raw linen, some tins of gesso and a pile of old hoop pine stretcher bars and a staple gun. A limited supply of acrylic paint, but enough to start I thought.

In the beginning it was more about culture than art. I felt as if I were undertaking an intensive course in Alyawarr culture. The artists were teaching me through the images and stories associated with their art; all about bush tucker and bush medicine. We also roamed over the country, hunting and gathering, often on tracks that were invisible to me. As I accompanied the artists and their children, I was

being educated about all that surrounded me. I learnt how everything is connected, in its place of belonging.

I had thrown my watch away, nature was my clock and I fell into the easy rhythm of community life, my worries and cares were swept away in the laughter of everyday life. I found myself in a world that was raw and earthy with the smell of new rain, fires and sunshine. Yet at the same time I was seeing and experiencing some things that profoundly disturbed me on a very deep level. It wasn't as if I had lived a sheltered life, far from it. As a young boy I had run away from my nice comfortable home in Sydney and hitched my way up into the Northern Territory and got a job on the VRD (Victoria River Downs) as a stockman, working and sleeping alongside Aboriginal stockmen.

At Ampilatwatja, in the faces of the people around me, I was seeing those old friends from my youth. It shocked and upset me to see the extreme hardships everyday life presented the Alyawarr people. The very core of my being was continually having to make adjustments. It wasn't unpleasant, just a bit scary. I was a stranger in a strange land. Who I was in the 'white world' seemed to disappear, as did all my ideas and notions about the way things are.

My solid rock was my family and in the evenings we laughed and played together with our children until we fell into bed exhausted. Listening to the Ampilatwatja band playing amplified country and western music into the early hours of the morning. Most nights I slept like a lamb.

It was hard to separate art business from everyday life. I was supposed to be an art coordinator, whatever that meant. No one could really say; it was the beginning of the community based art centres and no one had a clue. As art advisors we were thrown in the deep end and told "Go make an art centre." We had Papunya and Balgo as examples. The emphasis was on making money, providing opportunities and record keeping. I had to be everything to everybody and answerable to Desart who, in those early days, managed our finances and acquitted our Government funding. Almost everyone who wasn't in Desart was labeled a carpetbagger. This attitude had inflamed the whole Sandover region as well as the galleries in Alice Springs and I acquired bitter enemies, people whose faces I didn't even know.

As Cassie foretold, Desart handled the 'Money Story' badly from the beginning and in desperation and on the brink of collapse, they handed all the responsibilities back to the art centres. The artists I worked for were out thirty thousand dollars in artists' payments and I had to bear the force of their reaction to this loss. Desart's answer was to make us an Aboriginal Corporation. I thought personally they were deflecting their mistakes onto the art centres in order to avoid blame and to protect their jobs. My correspondence reflected those sentiments and was not well received. Out in the community the artists were open to becoming an Aboriginal Corporation, but taking the responsibility and understanding even the basics of the legal liabilities was problematic. Our struggle was ignored, it just didn't seem to fit with the bureaucrats, who were trying to create a best arts practice from their comfortable offices in town and were starting to mumble about needing more highly qualified art advisors.

Making art was about keeping culture alive, that's what painting was all about. "It's for our children," the artists would explain. The artists preferred to paint at home, sitting on their verandas in the evenings, in the company of children and dogs. The screech of laughter as a dog ran onto the canvas leaving a trail of painted footprints which was later incorporated into the painting. I now laugh when I think of the contribution the animal life at Ampilatwatja made to painting business.

I threw myself into art business “boots and all”. As quickly as I made primed stretches they were snatched away and disappeared into the community. Some traveled the length and breath of the Alyawarr homelands, to return as completed paintings. Most new paintings took my breath away, like jewels they rested in our house until they were logged on and the story written. Usually the first sign of a finished painting arriving was the sound of camp dogs. The canvas would be thrown onto the verandah like an old rag as if it had no significance at all. I was expected to unroll the painting and appraise it, while all the time the artist would stare with their back to me, out into the horizon, feigning indifference. Only when I started to ask about the story contained in the painting did everyone relax, and smiles and laughter quickly replaced concern and embarrassment.

Our house was a hive of activity. We opened up our home to city visitors, drawn to the community, through the art and culture. I got sick of hearing what a wonderful job I was doing and what a fantastic person I was. I thought I was being creamed and I hated it.

One morning I was expecting a plane to arrive at the small airstrip at Ampilatwatja with a mother and son who were both important gallery owners. The day before, I had picked up a couple from Alice Springs, who also owned a gallery. On the drive out, the woman sat in the back seat while her husband sat beside me in the front of the work vehicle, a beat up Toyota Land cruiser on the brink of extinction. We floated over the corrugations like a huge beast out of control, sucking in fine red dust. Total silence from the back seat. The female gallery owner had a wet scarf draped over her face and was clutching on, white knuckled, to the handle of the rear door. She stayed like that for the whole trip, 360 kilometres and when we got to our house at Ampilatwatja, there was no look of relief, just that dull look that trauma victims have.

So the next day when all these forces joined together at my house for lunch it became a crazy circus with the Mother and her son; a doctor and a lawyer and a very befuddled pilot. At the lunch table the sparks were beginning to smoulder, everyone was eyeing everyone else, except the pilot who ate with his head down and never said a word. The mother was telling her son what a useless, worthless person he was, in that polite way the upper crust have. Knives were out and being sharpened and it felt as if world war three was about to break out. When the paintings came out it was a disaster, each person wanted the other's choice; greed and possessiveness, anger and hostility ruled. I tried my hardest to divert the energies, but failed ... so as a last resort I ran out into the heat of the desert and our two dingoes followed. When I came back the son had joined forces with the doctor and they were having a heated discussion on the porch about the competition, while mother sat scowling on the vinyl lounge and the lawyer was lost in a book.

Not all of our visitors were so awful, most were a delight to host and took a real interest in the artists and their art and culture. Living in the outback, we enjoyed the fresh company and were often sad to see people go. I took our visitors and the artists on trips into Country. The women of Ampilatwatja were willing to go hunting at a moment's notice and before you knew it the Toyota would be full to overflowing with people and with much laughter we'd head off on one of the many dusty tracks.

Humbug. I know I have to talk about it, but it is a delicate topic and I hesitate because of its complexity. Humbug is always about money and there is never enough; it is closely tied to the money story. Communities are powerhouses for generating money into the pockets of the shopkeepers. After a while I noticed that it

didn't matter how much money an artist was paid it would all be gone in a day or two. Artists came to me almost everyday for money, in their round of hunting and gathering and it seemed constant ... I am an open hearted person and this vulnerability was played with great skill until I could bear it no more. If I said no I felt bad and if I said yes I felt worse.

One day it became so bad I lost my composure and like a 'wily-wily' I made a big noise hurling hot air at everyone. When I calmed down, I realised my weakness at not being able to say no, was being laid at the feet of the artists, I was blaming everyone else but myself. I sat in the red dirt under the shade of some corrugated iron sheets and explained to the ladies the reason for my behaviour. After much discussion in Alyawarr the artists decided that they would stop the humbug, no one was allowed to ask me for money anymore. I said sorry and thanked them and just when everything seemed so serious the ladies started to giggle, taking turns describing some part of my tantrum, which would spark off another round of laughter. All I could do was join in the laughter feeling a little embarrassed.

It took a couple of years for my relationship with the artists to become easy and a deep fondness and appreciation for the people I worked for grew stronger each day. I knew the names of the children and who was related to who and I began to understand the system of skin names and the complexity associated with them. At this point I knew I would never be able to fully understand my new friends and I recognised it as a limitation that made me determined to push my own boundaries. I wanted to understand why such a rich and beautiful culture was hanging on, unassisted, to the one thing ... Apmer ... Country, with such silent tenacity.

I remember a scene in New Zealand that will haunt me all my life. A very old Maori elder was taken back to the land he was born in and had not seen since his childhood. As he walked around touching the trees and the stones, caressing the very earth, tears were streaming down his face and he was inconsolable, I felt as if I were witnessing a similar attachment to a land of birth at Ampilatwatja.

I had spent nearly my entire life making art or being around people making art. I remember watching Colin McCann painting at Pakiri beach. There was never any uncertainty, never any hesitation: eye ...hand ... brush... paint.. canvas ...no pause for reflection, no room for anyone in this space, but the artist. I knew the moment I became an art coordinator at Ampilatwatja some desire inside me was being fulfilled. This seemed the perfect job.

I decided from the start that I would not interfere with the process of creating paintings. I became fascinated, content to watch and learn. I was told a lot about the old days and at first I thought it was a kind of unburdening and sharing but I was later to realise I was being helped, to put into context, all that I was being taught and experiencing, drawing me into the very centre of the culture and its connection to 'country' Aper. It is a complicated thing this notion of country, especially for Europeans to comprehend ...but if we look back on our far distant past, perhaps the shadow of remembrance is there. It is certainly one of the things that attracts people to the paintings.

I have purposely left to the end my own thoughts on Aboriginal art and I venture to express them now, knowing that each community is different and what was so for Ampilatwatja is not necessarily so for other art centres.

When we look at Aboriginal art we are standing in the middle of an oral tradition where everything is interconnected and nothing is hidden. If we can understand the power of a silent language and the images that nurture it, then, perhaps it strikes at

our own hearts and awakens something deep within us. What draws us behind the surface paint and textures are the very ancestors who created and populated all that surrounds us. Apmer, 'Country' is at the very core of existence. Modern society has constructed a world of concrete and steel to protect us from the natural world. Aboriginal art is created to bring us closer to the very earth beneath our feet. Kangaroo, Possum, Emu, Morning Star, Caterpillar, Bush Plum, Honey Ant, Kame, the poetry of names and the power of silence all contained within the boundaries of canvas and paint.

The dot has always been an important element in the creating of art and the Utopia artists perhaps pushed it way past the boundaries of any other art movement. A single dot could contain in its essence a thousand years of knowledge and on the surface its application, controlled in a myriad of ways, reflected the artist's viewpoint. The late Lily Sandover Kngwarrey would place a heavily loaded painting stick of white onto a black canvas and in one fluid motion push it away creating swirling patterns that stylised the grass which her painting represented. This grass was eaten by "Kangaroo rat" the small burrowing bettong, her totem, or dreaming as it sometimes called.

Minnie Apwerl, her hand like the beak of a bird with a long brush, stroking her Awelye (women's business) in the curved lines of body paint tracing the contours onto linen as if painting on a real person, her feet firmly placed in her culture as are all the artists.

Lily Morton Akemarr layering her fine dots in shimmering pastel hues, blending her colours together reflecting a true feeling of the country in all its awesome beauty. Paintings that took painstaking months to complete ... dot upon dot upon dot.

Emily Kngwarrey using a large round brush with short bristles and in that dump dump style, stuttering her dots across the canvas in urgent moods that demonstrated her vast ancestral knowledge in the ever present past. To this very day if I talk with any of her people, tears will quickly appear. "That old lady ...she was beautiful ...she was the boss for ceremony ... not many of those old ladies left now."

What influences Aboriginal art? And where is it coming from? Two important questions. If you have ever watched the "story game" you might understand the complexity of Aboriginal design and the ability to convey ancient stories, drawn within concentric circles on the red earth.

Tyepety ileyel, the story game, was played in some form across a wide group of languages in central Australia by women and young girls. In its simple form the storyteller sits on the ground and with the left hand smoothes and draws a circle in the red sand. Within this boundary the story will be drawn and told, gum leaves might be added to illustrate a point, all this done with the left hand, while the right hand holds a wire or thin stick which is beaten on the ground in a rhythm while the story is spoken and drawn. The hand becomes a perfect marker and in the blink of an eye, it can create any number of different footprints and animals; the language of the eye conveyed through the hand ... heart ... in rhythm with the storyteller.

Aboriginal artists have always been able to contemporize their ideas in the making of art. Art advisors do have an influence in the making of art. They give the artists feedback about how art business works. They encourage artists to step forward and claim their positions as artists, not mere labourers, and they make accessible as many new ways of making art as the artists desires. Rodney Gootch certainly did all of this and more. Rodney polished the glass for all of us to see, he treated the

Utopian artists ... with the respect of one artist to another. But for it to be suggested that the artists ever painted by someone else's design or influence, is to reveal an ignorance about Emily Kngwarrey, Minnie Apwerl, Lily Sandover Kngwarrey and their ilk. Even Pablo Picasso would have had problems matching the strong personalities of these ladies.

Divine geometry, as the famous French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson once said, "You've either got it or you haven't ... and if you have, it will come out in everything you do.

A story never ends, it just rests until it is time to re-surface.

Narayan Kozeluh 2012