

This publication is in support of the exhibition 'Black Abstract'.

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Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland Shire Council, dedicated to the late Eddie Santaqiuliana

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Foreword

People of the Quandamooka have lived on this country now referred to as Moreton Bay and the Redlands in Queensland for over 20,000 years. Historically, communication between people at different locations was by means of message-stick, beacon fires, and word of mouth; including calling between islands. After the arrival of Europeans in the 18th century, communication techniques were adapted and included mirror flashes, used over distances of up to 40 kilometres.

Black Abstract continues the dialogue for people across great distances. The exhibition brings country from the central desert across lands and waters, to connect with regional audiences and Murri communities. Black Abstract presents the work of renowned artists Ada Bird and Gloria Petyarre, Anmatyarr custodians who have painted the stories, symbols, patterns and their country Anungra for over twenty years.

By presenting this exhibition the Redland Art Gallery looks to define a sense of place and identity by communicating an exhibition that affords the viewing audience greater access and understanding of Australian Indigenous art. The exhibition does not consider Aboriginal art to contain abstract meaning, rather, a more literal relationship between land, time, and artists' story.

Black Abstract is coordinated by Redland Art Gallery and Woolloongabba Art Gallery in Queensland, Australia.

Steven Alderton

Co-curator

Tour Dates

Redland Art Gallery

Sunday 18 April - Tuesday 18 May 2004

Woolloongabba Art Gallery

Saturday 1st - Saturday August 7th 2004

Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery Friday 8 April - Sunday 9 October 2005

Tweed River Art Gallery

Thursday 1 September - Sunday 9 October 2005

RMIT Gallery

Monday 15 May - Saturday 24 June 2006

Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre Saturday 9 September - Sunday 15 October 2006



Ada Bird Petyarre is the eldest of the renowned Petyarre sisters and was born at a soakage in Anagrapa, on the former Utopia cattle station around 1930. Atnangkere, home of the Mountain Devil. Bush Bean and Emu is Ada's country. found roughly about 300kms NE of Alice Springs. Her career as an artist began in the late 1970's when batik was introduced to a number of Anmatyarr and Alyawarr women. Ada's early work was recognised for the fluid and prominant use of womens ceremonial knowledge in the construction of her silks. In the summer of 1988, she alongside her contemporaries including the late Emily Kngwarrey seized on an opportunity provided by CAAMA to attend painting workshops and by 1990 she had held her first solo show.

Ada's fifteen year association with painting and a continued relationhip with the Batik medium has paralleled her adult life. She was the first artist from the Utopia women's movement to be collected by the Australian National Gallery and her work adorns the walls of significant state and national museums and galleries in Australia. Her work outside of Australia resides in international collections throughout Europe, the United States and Asia.

Ada Bird is one of the most distinguished and dedicated artists of central Australia. Now in her seventies her ability to constantly rework and expand her visual vocabulary is second to few. As a very senior Anmatyarr woman she is respected and adored by her family kin and country.



Gloria Petyarre

Gloria Petyarre may well be recognized as the most prolific artist of the central Australian Indigenous art movement. A big presence, Gloria is a younger sister to many of her Petyarre kin, though her statue as an artist contrasts her cultural positioning. Like her sister Ada, Gloria is most fond of her country Atnangkere and has used the stories and images of Arnkerrthe, the Mountain Devil throughout her career.

Gloria too, enjoyed much acclaim for her work with the Batik medium, though her relationship with canvas and acrylic paint is one of much greater significance to the artist. Gloria often worked alongside the late Emily Kngwarrey and after her passing in 1996 developed into a very confident and independent painter. She is the most widely exhibited artist of the Utopia Women's movement and has travelled the globe with her work.

The confidence of Gloria Petyarre is represented in the multitude of imagery and styles she has created during her twenty five year career as an artist. Her work is held in the highest regard and has been collected heavily by institutions, museums and galleries both in Australia and across the world. Gloria is an artist who has grasped the opportunity to travel and converse outside her traditional culural perspectives, enjoying in the process a reputation as one of the most innovative painters in Australian art history.

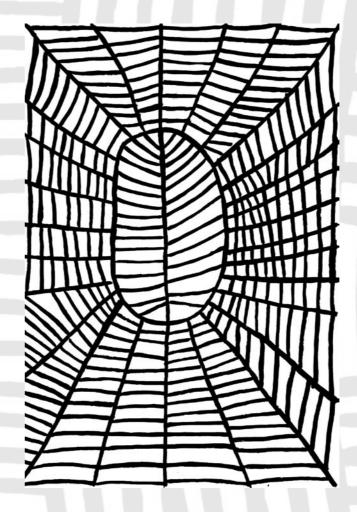


Black Abstract is a concept that formed the basis of an exhibition of paintings by sisters Ada Bird and Gloria Petyarre. With a curatorial aim of enhancing an audience's ability to read contemporary Australian indigenous art, Black Abstract references two fundamental concerns for readings of contemporary Australian Indigenous art. Black is a reference to the persistent use of race to identify contemporary indigenous art in Australia. Abstract refers to Australia's imported rather than inherited way of seeing and reading the work of contemporary indigenous artists. The essay Black Abstract seeks an explanation as to why the oldest languages of our country continue to fall upon deaf ears. In part, it is related to an Australian art history that continues to position Australian indigenous art as 'the other', an outsider in its own country. Forced into living a fringe camp existence on the outskirts of Australian contemporary art, the work of Australian indigenous artists has been marginalised, separated by race and misread for decades by Eurocentric modernist rhetoric.

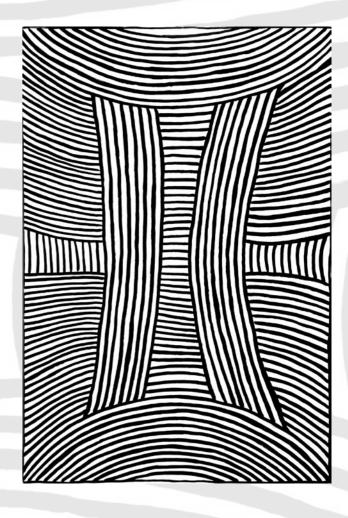
Though the Russian constructivist Kasmir Malevich is credited as the 'father of abstraction', it was the cubists, Picasso and Braque, who shaped our way of seeing art in the 20th century. For almost a hundred years historians have argued about the origins of cubism, to no avail. Picasso was aloof when asked about his interest in African art and the possibility that indigenous design provided a fundamental departure from formal constructions of portraiture and landscape for western painters. His reluctance to honor indigenous art as the architecture of cubism allowed for the perpetuation of a separatist rhetoric in art theory, one that positioned indigenous cultures, their artists and art as 'the other', outside western civilisation. Primitivism at best described contemporary western society's fascination with indigenous art and the collecting of artifacts. The protocols for identifying western art were therefore not applicable to 'primitive' art, aiding and a betting with Picasso in the creation of 'anonymous' black art. By the late 20th century in the face of postmodern theory, Primitivism was regarded as little more than a Eurocentric perspective. Yet such theory again relegated the 'primitive' to the critical category of 'other' and continued to marginalise indigenous artists from western art history.

The associated benefits both socially and economically of becoming a recognised artist were bitterly never realised by Albert Namitjira, Australia's first 'indigenous' artist. Australia's most celebrated watercolourist, Namitjira's work was something of an anomaly in the early 20th century. His ability to translate his country using western constructions of painting allowed Namitjira an authorship over his work and a copyright not afforded to 'primitive' art. His palette was compared to the European fauvist art movement and his sense of perspective honoured. Namitijira was removed by his art from the 'primitive', and from the paternalistic and Darwinist views of European culture. His work was also forcibly removed from his own culture and seen as European in its perspective. It was the work of historians who created a 'primitive' position for Namitjira in Australian art history, his legacy as an artist resting in the Hermannsburg (Aranda) School of watercolourists who followed. The school's place in Australian art history is now almost anonymous, their possible claim to be the true Impressionists of Australian art history overshadowed by the Heidelberg school.

The Aranda School of watercolour continued well into the 1970's in Australia before being superseded by the western desert acrylic movement under the 'primitive' title of Aboriginal art. With similar views to their European ancestors, Australians, namely missionaries, school teachers, anthropologists, historians and curators, perpetuated the notion of 'anonymous' black art in Australia for close on thirty years. 'Aboriginal art' has become a pseudonym for 'the other', the outsider in Australian art history. It is ironic to think that the paintings that are original and inherent to the Australian landscape are in fact marginalised from its country's art history.







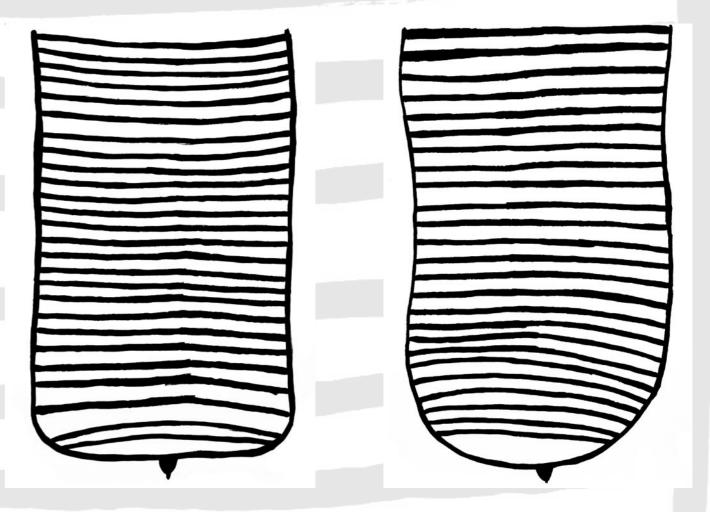
Ada Bird Petyarre
Body Stripes
2002
180 x 120 cm
Acrylic on canvas

Bardon's anthropological-like process of reading the Papunya boards was concerned with the documentation and authentication of designs relating to ceremonial practices. Religious significance was associated with notions of importance in the painting, with details of the most sacred information said to be 'painted over' or 'edited out' for an uninitiated audience. Diagrams and pointers were used to decode an artist's language. The need for an explanation or some abbreviated translation of a painting's content is a Eurocentric practice of reading art based on race. These practices in reading Australian indigenous art have directly created the need for an unprecedented proof of authorship and authenticity in the movement. To question the authorship of an artist based on their cultural heritage is racist. We do not refer to Picasso's work as Spanish art, or Van Gogh's work as Dutch art, yet Aboriginal art continues to be used as a referent to the work of artists who are indigenous to Australia. Cultural purity is not a measure of artistic merit and accomplishment; it is merely a reflection of persisting colonial attitudes. We understand historically that Minimalist artists made minimal artworks and painters of French Impressionism painted the light, so is Aboriginal art painted in an Aboriginal way?

Whether writers be academic, journalistic, anthropological or simply critical, they have generally failed to talk about what is actually on the canvas. Constant references to and associations with spiritual beliefs and cultural authenticity continue to be used to describe contemporary art made by Australian indigenous painters. The mysticism of 'dreaming' has been discussed over and above the intentions and concerns for image making by artists who openly admit to seeking engagement in an expressive dialogue with their audience. Regional differences, intra and inter-cultural and community influence, artists process and historical shifts in formal concerns for image making are essential elements of the current Australian indigenous art movement, yet descriptive dialogue continues to reference notions of race in the identification and authorship of an artwork.

By perpetuating a 'primitive' view of Australian indigenous cultures through 'primitive' readings of their art, we are simply replacing paternalistic and anthropological views, which in turn replaced assimilist visions, which replaced the sympathy of protectionism. We have developed a culture of insulation from and ignorance towards the very art that represents our collective country, its associated designs, immemorial histories, knowledge and people. What audiences have come to view and recognise as difference, comes from (is) an act of marginalisation. Race is used to define personal, artistic and aesthetic languages, meaningful and descriptive, articulate and figurative, collectively shared and individually spoken. Australian indigenous artists' intentions, concerns and decisions in the process and practice of painting are all too often unseen by the audience and unheard in discussions regarding their art.

The cultural distance in our landscape exists between us as the viewer and the value we place in our cultural inheritance. Australian audiences' quest to understand the spiritual content of indigenous art may uncover much more by looking toward an objective viewing of contemporary Australian indigenous art. The conservative distance of museum, curator and critic has deprived audiences and indigenous artists alike, in turn maintaining an historical and literary chasm in Australian culture, a great Australian bite in our collective cultural, social and religious landscape.



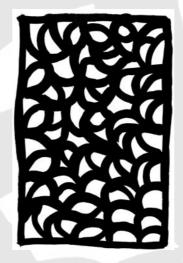
Ada Bird Petyarre
Body Stripes
2002
180 x 120 cm x 2
Acrylic on canvas

Our understanding of aesthetics as Australians, the way we see, is imported not inherited. Curators of museums have been left with the dilemma of consigning Australian indigenous art to its own corner of the gallery or its own gallery altogether. Acts of assimilation have been tried in our country for decades and failed. Our adopted and imported modern cultural aesthetics remain western; they are American, non-European, both modern and postmodern, and a cataract on the very way we see. Indigenous Australians live modern and contemporary lives. Westernism is not enough to either extinguish or replace indigenous beliefs of what is real and tangible in our country. Denying the importance of indigenous mythology in our landscape has disenfranchised a unique and valid answer to or questions and recognition of place on this continent.

Modern Australia's understanding of abstraction was directly imported from the United States, along with the American dream, pop culture and Pine Gap. Australian museums and galleries collected the works of artists like Pollock, Johns and De Kooning, in Hollywood fashion, while the work of the Field painters, Australia's isolated hard-edged dialogue with abstraction, was largely ignored. The Field painters, a derivative of American minimalist theories, were struck down by the epidemic of provincialism, an ironic affliction that continues to infect the aesthetic of the Australian artist today. The Australian way of seeing, fuelled up on American Abstract Expressionism's gas about the faint relationship between mark and object, headed down a road of using the abstract as a means of identification. By the late 1980's, the inescapable passing cloud of postmodernism rained down heavily upon our collective landscape and ways of seeing. At the same time, major survey shows were being exported to England, Europe and America. Critics began to opine that painting by Australian indigenous artists was merely a form of cultural reproduction, rather than an outwardly expressive, or pure form of art. At the same time in Yuendemu, the late Eric Michaels, co-founder of Warlpiri Media, wrote that indigenous art could be viewed using the schematic themes of postmodernism. The idea of cultural reproduction raised by earlier critics was argued by Michaels to hold little weight, as central Australian artists were themselves appropriating western mediums, acrylic paint and linen to convey or portray their narratives, stories and dreamings. The stories may have been traditional but the time and materials they found form in were western and contemporary.

Postmodernism is a framework for the photographer, not necessarily a rhetoric, devoted to the ideals associated with painting. The picture, the photo, advertising were all-important aesthetics to postmodernist theory; modern painting had simply become abstract. The exact nature of photojournalism also shaped our way of seeing in the late twentieth century; a record rather than a response to an event became more important to us. The graphic image of a burning Vietnamese girl becomes as iconic in the late twentieth century as 'Guernica', Picasso's depiction of the Spanish civil war.

When writing, Michaels resists the urge to assimilate in his interpretations, choosing instead to suggest that western canons like postmodernism can be used to read central Australian Indigenous art. He likened the notion of reproduction to the artistic process of painting and repainting one's story. The collective nature of Warlpiri painting processes at that time lead Michaels to liken the process of making a painting to the notion of production, as opposed to traditional concepts of painting as an act of creation.

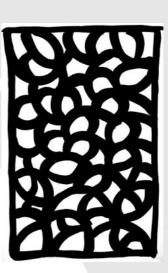


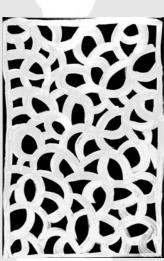














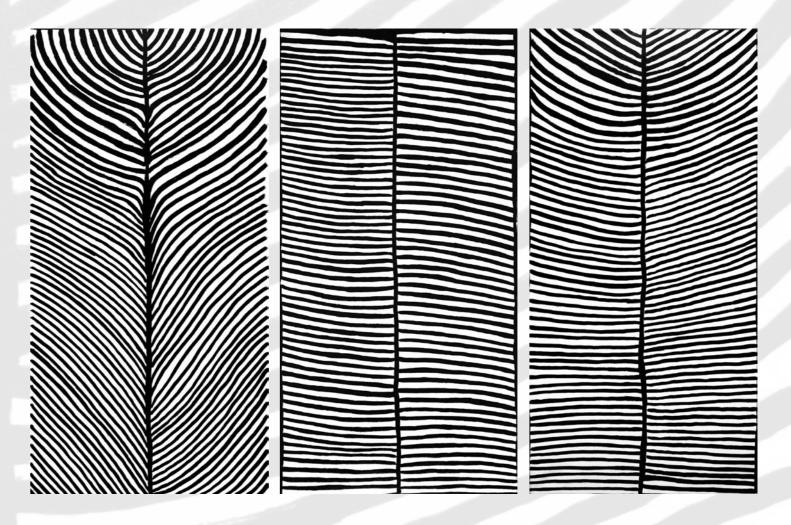
Gloria Petyarre Arnkerrthe 2004 90x60 cm x 8 Acrylic on linen

What Michaels saw, however, were not acts of manufacturing or western reproduction but the first statements made by Warlpiri in contemporary painting. From consultation between old men to family participation on major canvases, traditional protocols were employed in the conception and construction of a painting. Artists made decisions on the use of colours, applications and techniques both collectively and individually. Whereas western art history has seen the artist and the painter as essentially an individual, contemporary Australian indigenous art is born from an ownership system based on kinship and the sharing of knowledge. Imagery has multiple owners. A story or country may be represented by a set of designs and may be painted by those entitled to speak for that landscape. How that canvas may be painted is governed by the formal concerns of traditional patterns, though the artist is still recognised as the author of the artwork.

Reproduction claims to be exact, a replica of an original. In the paintings of Ada Bird and Gloria Petyarre, however, while stories are told and retold upon the canvas, they are not acts of reproduction. Every painting by its own nature is original; one canvas is not a copy of another, nor is the retelling of a story simply a copy of itself. Ada and Gloria take inspiration in the construction of their work from the freedom of individual expression and the use of selected cultural information. What is evident is that the story or dreaming is the premise, not the impetus for making art; this rests with the artist. The story behind a work, however, is as influential to the artwork as the artist's visual configuring of that story. Choice of composition, palette, medium and technique are the artist's tools and the foundation for their work. A location may often form the subject matter of a painting, however the finished work is never simply a reference to geographical position.

Ada Bird and Gloria Petyarre are Anmatyarre custodians, having painted the stories, symbols and patterns of their country, Atnangkere, some 300kms NE of Alice Springs, for decades. Gloria and Ada are two of seven sisters who enjoy careers as contemporary painters, their art first attracting attention when working with the medium of Batik. Their success extended from exhibiting nationally and internationally, to being acquired by major private and public collections and published in the notable art text "Utopia Batik". Ada and Gloria made a shift to painting after the Summer Project of 1988, conducted by the late Rodney Gooch for CAAMA. The shift to a more immediate medium (Batik is a lengthy process of waxing and dying) was made by a significant number of women from Utopia, including the late Emily Kame Kngwarrey, as well as by some men from the community.

Whereas Malevich found a void in a painting of a black square, the absence of colour in this exhibition is by no means a symbol for lack of content. It is also no reflection of the brilliant colourists that Gloria and Ada are. It is merely a curatorial attempt to provide a context for the audience to see similarities and differences between these two artists' works. Just as watercolour opened up a myriad of relationships for Namitjira, the seemingly endless palette of acrylic paint (watercolour's contemporary equivalent) provides for central Australian indigenous artists an opportunity to bring to canvas observations of landscape beyond the colouring of ochres. What may allow an audience to discover the riches of artistic content inherent in these works is an understanding that paint is as much a descriptive medium for these artists as it was an absence of meaning for Malevich.



Ada Bird Petyarre
Atnewerle, Bush Bean
2002
120 x 60 cm x 3
Acrylic on canvas

The work of Gloria and Ada has been recognised for its progressive nature, the use of linear marks and fluid brushwork attributes and indicators of their confidence as painters. The compositional symmetries and figurative use of cultural symbols as signifiers are examples of the artists' intent to depict a relationship between the contributions of the self, a knowledge of story, and observations of environment - social, cultural and spiritual. This set of spatial relationships, commonly known as 'painting country' amongst its exponents, has grown to become one of the strongest themes in contemporary Australian indigenous art. From Papunya to Utopia, from Yuendemu to Kintore, artists have built contemporary narratives that incorporate notions of relationship as opposed to juxtaposition, symmetry in favour of geometry, and the positive over the anti-aesthetic.

The story of 'Arnkerrthe', the mountain devil lizard, whose travels across the sand hills of Atnangkere is as much an epic journey as the travels these two artists have made in painting, might be seen by Michaels as one of the most heavily reproduced or published Indigenous histories in Australia. What he may fail to see, however, is the artist's intent, their continuing dialogue with a narrative and the multitude of artistic responses Arnkerrthe offers to them as painters.

Ada Bird Petyarre, the eldest of the renowned Petyarre sisters, is much older than her younger sister Gloria. She is a woman of much generosity and of the old ways. Her spirit is endowed with the kindest of wisdoms and her heart is as big as her country. As an artist, Ada has always walked ahead of her contemporaries. Her influence as a painter is visible over three generations of established and emerging painters of Angarapa, Utopia. Her career is symbolic of the significant contributions Utopia artists have made to Australian contemporary art.

Whereas men in the Western Desert had been using imagery belonging to ceremonial ground paintings, women in Utopia drew their techniques and imagery from the body painting of their 'Awelye'. Instead of the meticulous process of ground painting (though sculpture or installation may be a more accurate description), Ada and her contemporaries approached the canvas if it was a skin. The black backgrounds of their canvases represent an origin, a place to begin rather than a void. With languid lines, paint is allowed to mimic ochred skin, in turn allowing the perpetuation of a cultural practice, a brush becoming an extension of an old lady's forefinger.

The steady nature of a mature line underlies Ada's figurative approach to painting. Her compositions appear almost geometric; though symmetry is more apt a description of the graceful approach Ada takes to a balanced image. In her later years, Ada would instruct a grand-daughter or two to fold the canvas in half, or ask them to put their finger in the middle, so she can see where the centre is and where to begin. This is not a starting point; rather it is simply an old lady getting her bearings. Any of her paintings could have been realised many years before their actual creation.





Gloria Petyarre
Stripes
2004
90x60 cm x 2
Acrylic on linen

Ada's mark possesses a distinguished quality, the subtle bumps and undulations of her line meandering across the canvas with ease, unobstructed and seemingly constant. 'Athwerle' is an exquisite example of her response to form and process. Slowly she grows the design up the strait of her canvas; her line is a description of foliage, not simply an abstraction of positive and negative space. Ada's 'Athwerle' triptych conveys a quiet evolution, a result of process rather than a deliberate attempt to abstract a dialogue from design. Ada's mark is individual; her content inherited and often collectively owned provides a starting point for the painter, not a schematic boundary.

Like a dust-ridden Toyota that carries the scars of a long journey, painting has been for Ada a vehicle that has served her well. She has spoken a language that has described her country as much as it has her character, charm, persistent nature and dedication to painting. She has marked out much of what has laid unknown to many Australians, describing to us all, the initiated and uninitiated, patterns, symbols, stories and designs of her country, in a language that comes from a time immemorial.

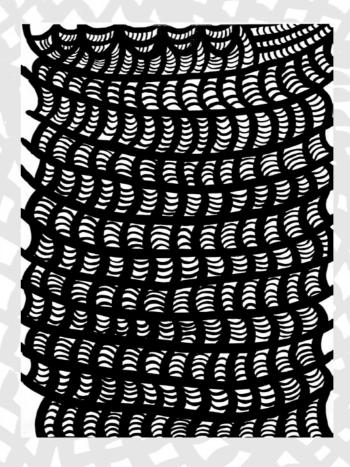
Ada's younger sister Gloria is an immense presence, whether you are in her personal company or in front of her work; a seamless confidence is evident from the outset. Like her sisters, Gloria has traveled extensively during her career, which has undoubtedly benefited her practice. Like many painters of the central Australian indigenous art movement, Gloria Tamerre Petyarre has navigated her story and self through the western maze of modernism. Gloria is a great-grandmother, a grandmother, a mother, a sister, a partner and a provider to her kin. To a larger audience she is one of Australia's most significant painters, an artist whose practice has become as expansive as it is extensive and diverse.

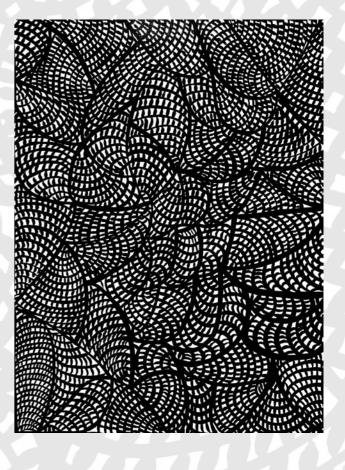
Since her early work, Gloria has continued to reinvent, reinterpret and reconfigure her story, creating new narratives and ways for us to view her country. There have been many constants in Gloria's journey to date. 'Arnkerrthe', the mountain devil lizard, continues to provide inspiration. The parallel lines inscribed into the rocks of Atnangkere by Arnkerrthe's claws as he climbed from within the earth is evident in the markings of body stripes, which has produced a dialogue that has been a consistent voice, one that has not wavered or weakened. Gloria's practice is a process of re-centering oneself, of remembering heritage and lineage, a personal and individual pursuit that has carried much cultural responsibility.

Gloria's work can be seen to be a self-portrait in perpetuity. Rather than adding or introducing new information to her dialogue, Gloria chooses to reconfigure her language in order to extend the boundaries of her visual vocabulary. This is a conversation she has managed to maintain, a story in itself, of personal expression and cultural expansion. Her mark contains a duality, sometimes soft and organic like a leaf, other times bold and robust. This is a reflection of a big personality, a persona as expansive as the volume of work she has produced.

Painting is a compulsive practice in Gloria's life. Painting, she claims, keeps her sane and orientates her in a world of constant change. Since she began painting in the late 1980's, Gloria has marked out much new country for her beloved story of Arnkerrthe. Like an old friend, Gloria has an ability to revisit and re-interrupt the traditions of her culture in order to articulate her contemporary self. Painting has become for Gloria a powerful narrative, one that is animated, sophisticated and articulate. Her speech is subtle and rhythmic, truly a personal poetic, as the canvas she claims belongs to the artist as much as it does to her story.

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Gloria Petyarre
Hairstring for Arnkerrthe
2004
120x90 cm
Acrylic on linen

Gloria Petyarre
Arnkerrthe
2004
120x90 cm
Acrylic on linen

Notions of 'country' and 'multiplicity' convey the idea that a single narrative, design or pattern can be viewed in more than one form of visual language or order, is inherent to a process of refiguring rather than abstraction. Gloria's 'Arnkerthere' series presents a process of personal accent and binary balance. The composition is central to the relationship between black and white in these works, the mark originating from the flick of Arnkerthere's claws. Again and again, as Arntherketre moved across the country of Atnangkere, Gloria revisits, retells, and reinterprets this journey. Through rituals she has practiced, observations from life's rich experience and knowledge well-kept, Gloria is able to compose an image of a perpetual journey, a description of persistence, grace, balance and distance. Her mark follows the story across and around, her gestures, footprints or body stripes the very marks of the landscape and a description of country. They all originate from one place, residing in the relationship between self, story and country. It is singular and multiple, it is old and always new, it has been used by many and is a language of Gloria's alone.

With every interpretation, reinvention or reconstruction, the dialogue becomes no less readable. As much as the surrealist Magritte insisted, "this is not a pipe", Gloria assures us that the image is still of Arnkerrthe. Whether it be scratches in the sand, or the bold, fluid lines from her brush, Gloria has navigated both herself and story across rugged terrain. Her legacy as an artist is testament to the importance of story and place, a graceful dialogue with the representational and a desire to portray a personal aesthetic. Her work is evidence that the artist lays at the origin of the painting, not the story itself. The paintings are a result of Gloria's decisions, her knowledge and choices.

Australians have been determined to exist on this continent with minimal abilities to communicate, relate to, and read the country. The way to achieve a sense of place rather than the eccentric identities of our ancestors is intrinsic to our relationship with our country's custodians and a way of seeing that is uniquely Australian. Although currently marginalised in our art history and designated its own spaces in our museums and galleries, Australian indigenous art will continue to be seen. The phenomenon of this art movement is unsurpassed in our landscape and our country's history. In the forward to his book 'White Mans Got No Dreaming', W.E.H Stanner suggested it would be the 'artists' who would be first cross our great cultural divide. He was alluding to a conversation that would originate from Australian indigenous artists. There have been Australian artists like Preston, Tuckson and Johnson who have tried to point an audience in the direction of our 'true country'. Tony Tuckson's work to develop an indigenous art collection in the New South Wales Art Gallery is further recognition of an Australian artist who saw much value in the work and aesthetics of Australian indigenous artists.

Australian indigenous artists look at where they come from, rather than somewhere they imagine themselves to be. The *Black Abstract* that befalls our eyes is neither the passing, nor a relic or artifact of Australia's indigenous cultures. It is a dialogue that needs to be entered into. The language of a reconciled country has been hanging on gallery walls for decades. The more we look, the more we might think and eventually may realise, that something so invaluable, so unique, and so important to Australia's collective future, is the disintegration of a black abstract.

Simon Turner

Curator Black Abstract Director Woolloongabba Art Gallery

