

Contemporary Aboriginal Art: Kathleen Petyarre

Jessica Griggs – July 29, 2010

Kathleen Petyarre is recognised by many art critics and collectors as one of Australia's well known senior Aboriginal artists, who depicts central Australian desert landscapes with sensitivity and strength through visually compelling paintings that represent her culture and the landscape known as the Atnangker, later named Utopia. Kathleen's bush name is Kweyetwemp, and Petyarre is described as being her skin name, not a surname as such. In this essay the work of Kathleen Petyarre will be analysed and discussed, with reference to her recognition in the contemporary art world.

Throughout Kathleen's life she has grown up with the traditions and ceremonial practises of the Anmatyerre tribe, in a landscape covered with spinifex and hilly areas with low-lying vegetation that extends over 200 square kilometres. The weather is hot and dry with red sandy earth, but water is still sustained in permanent rock holes, creek beds and underground areas. During the wet season the Atnangker country is transformed with flooding rains and hailstorms which change the colour of the red earth to a colourless cloudy hue (Nicholls and North 2001, 6). The landscape and cultural traditions all play an important role in the production of Kathleen's remarkable artworks.

Referencing art with the surrounding landscape has, for a long while, been an established tradition and passion for the Aborigine people, as it is essentially important for them to communicate values of unique beliefs within the landscape and express their culture with dignity. Certain plants, flora, trees, marsupials, insects, reptiles and other natural resources are all significant motifs within the Aboriginal culture; some of the well known animals like the thorny devil lizards are believed to be a great Dreamtime Ancestor in the Atnangker country and an important subject to the Petyarre family (Nicholls and North 2001, 8).

This unique lizard, known as Arnkerrth to the Aborigine people, is depicted in many of Kathleen's artworks as the Old Woman Mountain Devil. These timid creatures move slowly and jerkily in the sand leaving patterned tracks of semi-circles, comparable patterns are a characteristic style throughout Kathleen's paintings (Nicholls and North 2001, 8). Nicholls and North (2001, 7) also discuss that the Petyarre family developed knowledge of locations with specific plants, animals and water sources, gaining a history of the spiritual and cultural significance to their country. The knowledge of having skills in navigation was an important way of life for survival, especially in a desert landscape, thus expressions of this are depicted in Kathleen's artistic works with reference to accurate mind maps that explore and identify the vast terrain.

Papunya art, referred as being dot and circle art, is the renowned style that Kathleen uses to portray her Dreaming of Ancestors and Ancestral landscapes, creating detailed artworks that display a kind of three dimensional image of vast terrain with spots of shrubs, trees, sacred places, contours of the land and detailed patterns of Ancestral Spirits such as the Mountain Devil Lizard. This intricate dot and circle art was a type of new style that had not really been produced before, especially in this manner (see Caruana 1993, 101-161). Kathleen's paintings have a type of flowing style with subtle colour changes and rhythmic design.

Astonishing self-camouflaging powers of the Thorny Devil Lizard, Arnkerrth, have been a fascination to Kathleen for many years thus instigating her to create artworks that depict this Ancestor, displaying the beauty of the creature on canvas. Arnkerrth is not represented figuratively in her work but rather spatially with patterns, textures and colour. All over Australia many Aborigine Ancestors are depicted figuratively in historical and contemporary art, but the Anmatyerre arts are quite the contrary, with millions of dots that make up a spatial, textural and patterned representation, rather than descriptive and distinguishable images (Nicholls and North 2001, 10). Nicholls and North also point out that Kathleen's work is a simple reconstruction of visible spatial features. This is because most of her art conveys a type of aerial map of the landscape, similar to a view from an aircraft or a birds-eye perspective.

These paintings offer an integrated spatial, environmental, economic, spiritual and moral reading of the land... Abstract spatial features such as socio-political units and boundaries, temporal events that can be linked to spatial features, organisational events, for instance initiation ceremonies, and a high level of environmental knowledge are also incorporated into the paintings, in a condensed fashion. Each work is accompanied by an elaborate and lengthy oral narrative, the retelling of which can take hours, and which custodians may sing, dance and paint. The paintings are visual, iconic metaphors for these longer narratives, which may be re-created via a variety of different art forms (Nicholls and North 2001, 10).

While many parts of Australia were being developed and white settlers occupied the land, the Petyarre family had never seen a white person until the late 1940's. From this point Kathleen was fascinated and intrigued by another way of life, although some changes were not always easy, they remained non-judgemental about the dominant culture and the language was soon learnt and applied in her life. Kathleen's first encounter with Western society art processes was around 1974 when the Utopia school, which she worked at, visited Wollongong where they introduced the batik dying process.

In 1977 Jenny Green arrived in Utopia and began a career as an art teacher, organising batik workshops for the Aborigine women, including tie dying and woodblock printing (Ryan and Healy 1998, 14). This became a wide marketing industry and advanced into many opportunities for the Aborigines, later leading to the formation of the Utopia Women's Batik Group in 1978 (Caruana 1993, 147).

Painting processes were introduced later in the 1980s, and the familiarity within Aboriginal art and design began to take further preference in Kathleen's life. Batik processes were a major innovation for the Aborigines and very quickly became a popular practise and creative link between the traditional and contemporary, gaining economic potential and recreation with cultural values (Nicholls and North 2001, 20). Kathleen's batik works display a variety of meaningful marks, patterns and representational imagery that expresses her connections in the Utopia terrain with

Dreamtime associations of the thorny lizard, other cultural themes and assertions of land rights. This significant social movement of the batik era was an important time in history, for it gave Kathleen and many other indigenous artists' recognition in the art world and caused progressive political land rights for natives and foreigners (Nicholls and North 2001, 20).

Painting methods were adopted by Kathleen in 1986, as the smoke and smells of the batik process became a health issue. Rodney Grooch was the new art adviser during this time and organised many painting workshops and exhibitions until his departure in 1992. Soon after, many Utopia artists including Kathleen, gained wider recognition on the cultural map and were supported by several other professional art advisers (Nicholls and North 2001, 23-24). One important subject in the Aboriginal culture is that each artist, existing in certain areas of the land, are only allowed to paint the Dreaming narratives that belong to that particular area and their Ancestry (Nicholls 2003, 18 and Caruana 1993, 15). This explains why Kathleen's art is limited to painting only a few Dreamtime figures, such as the Emu (*Emu Dreaming*, 1992), the Thorny Lizard (*Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 1991) and details of her Ancestry landscape (*Storm in Atnangkere Country II*, 1996).

During 1996, Kathleen produced a painting entitled *Storm in Atnangkere Country II*; this piece won her the prestigious National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Art Award. A year later however, this painting led to a scandal provoked by Kathleen's ex-husband Ray Beamish, who proclaimed to an art critic, Susan McCulloch, that large sections of her work had been completed by him. Even so, Kathleen acknowledged that some assistance was given by Beamish, but the work was entirely her own creation that related to her Dreaming with the land and Ancestry, consequently Kathleen was able to keep the Award (Genocchio 2008, 191).

Circumstances of judging and criticising art arose many times for several Aborigine artists and a selected few were often chosen above others. Nicholls and North (2001, 30) discuss that Aborigine artists of the Anmatyerr tribe were singled out for special praise and recognition in the art market, while others were less wanted or unwanted. Kathleen

however, was chosen above others because she was respected by her fellow Anmatyerr and had a thorough and grounded knowledge of the Mountain Devil Dreaming, which obviously interested art critics. The discussion continues that although many Anmatyerr artists were ignored, they have ‘...been recently and rudely propelled into a world dominated by the socio-economic norms of late capitalism and their paintings are no longer judged simply by their *use* value, but to a much greater extent than previously by their *exchange* value’ (Nicholls and North 2001, 30).

In this increasingly global market, the art of Kathleen and many other artists has now been driven into the world of circulating and trading commodities. Consequently if indigenous artists did not gain the respect of dealers, collectors and critics, their art would not obtain value in the market. Even so, Kathleen has worked hard to understand these circumstances in determining and negotiating these criteria (Nicholls and North 2001, 30). Kathleen is highly disciplined as an artist and has attained a prominent name as a respected artist by her style, passion and commitment in producing fine art.

Different styles and new art processes were always an interest for many individual Aborigine artists because new materials meant new challenges and unique styles. In February 1990, Christopher Hodge and Helen Eager introduced and organised artists to participate in woodblock carving and printing workshops, calling it The Utopia Suite. ‘The Utopia Suite is the largest print survey of an Aboriginal community yet undertaken, and is believed to be the largest group publication of its type produced in Australia’ (Boulter 1991, 142).

Kathleen’s naïve depiction of a woman (*Untitled*, 1990) is, without a doubt, said to be the most individual and outstanding figurative image of The Utopia Suite (Boulter 1991, 143), mostly because it was such a stark contrast from her other works of patterned images made up with thousands of dots, which have significant meanings within sections of the entire painting. Kathleen’s woodblock print (*Untitled*, 1990) from The Utopia Suite workshops, suggests a remarkable, bold and confident artwork with success in contemporary art style. Boulter (1991, 143) points out that this particular artwork was successful because it was ‘the shock of the new.’

Seeking depth in artworks has always been a major obsession for viewers and critics, as they want to see meanings and purpose in the work. Kathleen's art certainly expresses layers of meanings and invites viewers to see Indigenous culture with poetic visions. Art critics have discussed Kathleen's work in terms of Kant's theory of the sublime, and likened it with Ross Bleckner's fascinating study of the genetic material and cell structure. Kathleen however, tries to keep her meaning intact and evokes her Dreaming the more, bringing into account concealment rather than revelations, making her work practical, strategic and poetic (Nicholls and North, 2001, 31).

"Kathleen Petyarre is among that handful of Indigenous Australian artists whose work has contributed to opening up what had become pigeon-holed as Indigenous Australian Art to a broader set of possible meanings" (Nicholls and North 2001, 31). Deep meanings of the Dreaming are throughout Kathleen's work, but they also portray a type of multiple visualization with qualities of abstraction, expressionism, impressionism, minimalism and even post-modern ideas, as well as post-ethnography (Nicholls and North 2001, 31). These ideas are possibly expressed in her work because of other cultural influence, inspiration, and realisation of what captivates an audience.

Frequent worldwide travelling soon developed into an integral aspect in Kathleen's life as her career in art became more renowned. Exhibitions with Kathleen's artworks were successful events in many countries around the globe with awards, sales and prominent recognition following. Different cultures and artworks became a fascination to Kathleen, but she seemed to see Western designs as art that lacked a story (Nicholls and North 2001, 29). Thus her style and passion for the Australian land and her Dreaming flourished the more, captivating many foreign viewers with a dissimilar culture.

Today Kathleen's Dreaming of Arnkerrth still exists as a common theme in her work, suggesting the characteristics of the creature along with beauty, texture, strength, and harshness of the land. Arnkerrth, or the Old Woman Mountain Devil lizard, believed to be an Ancestral Spirit, characteristically portrayed as a heroic and canny creature that uses all her intellectual powers and strength to survive and journey through the arid

landscape; the Old Lizard Woman is indeed physically and mentally tough. These characteristics are portrayed in many of Kathleen's paintings, and also have personal meanings that coincide with the individuality of Arnkerrth.

Discussions by Nicholls and North claim that Arnkerrth is, in some ways, depicted as Kathleen Petyarre herself because of similar experiences and traits. 'Arnkerrth's ability to deal with adversity, the now exponentially increased danger and complications that arise as she attempts to negotiate her way through her own country, and her dealings with those who cross her path, friendly or otherwise, all represent new versions of old challenges. But, as a result of her early period of learning the complex art and science of survival, Arnkerrth is unfailingly prepared' (Nicholls and North 2001, 29).

Kathleen's life in the harsh Australian land, involvement in art groups, travels overseas, conforming to Western culture and gaining wide recognition in the contemporary art world have all had an effect on her life, but like the Old Lizard Woman, *Arnkerrth*, Kathleen continues to excel and survive as a spirited person with established and stable characteristics. Kathleen's art is truly an important detail and expression of her life, which will survive as an amazing story to the world in years to come.

References

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