Purnu, Tjanpi, Canvas.
Art of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands

Explosions of colour from Contemporary Ngaanyatjarra artists and Western Desert art.
Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, 10 February to 12 May 2012.

Purnu, Tjanpi, Canvas. Art of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands is an exhibition of the dynamic creativity of the Western Desert’s Ngaanyatjarra artists. As the companion exhibition to the launch of Tim Acker and John Carty’s authoritative account of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands’ art centres, Art of the Lands showcases recent Yarnangu acrylic painting in context with the enduring tradition of purnu (wood carving) and tjanpi (grass weaving), providing a new lens through which to better understand the inventiveness and artistry of these desert people.

Elegant and whimsical, the art of Ngaanyatjara artists reveals a glorious world of colour and craftsmanship as a living heritage. For over 30 years these custodians of Country, scattered throughout the Lands, have expressed themselves through a lively and evolving creative practice that blends traditional and contemporary approaches.

The growth of community-based art centres has been central to the emergence of this new school of Western Desert art. Built on the creative and cultural expression of Ngaanyatjarra people, the six art centres surveyed (Kayili, Maruku, Papulankutja, Tjanpi, Tjarlirli, Warakurna) provide the business and professional support that enables an astonishing and collaborative enterprise to succeed in remotest Australia.

The exhibition showcases the humour and playful innovation of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, the explosive eclecticism of artists in translations of weaving and carving into paint, and the glorious canvases that reflect the completeness of the desert and community life.

We learnt to do painting long after we had been doing purnu and tjanpi.
—Thelma McLean.

Art in the Lands
Anmanari Brown, *Seven Sisters*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 49.5 x 151.5 cm © the artist (via Papulankutja Artists), image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

Reggie Jackson, *Illurpa*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 151 x 185 cm © the artist (via Papulankutja Artists)

*Tjayangka Woods’ hands and purnu*, 2011
(The hands of Tjayangka Woods, one of Papulankutja’s most senior painters, as she waits to sell her purnu to the Maruku purnu-man in Blackstone)
Photo by Tim Acker
© Tjayangka Woods (via Papulankutja Artists)

Jackie Giles, *working on a new painting*, 2009
Photo by Tim Acker
© Kayili Artists.
Tjitji pirni!
Angilyiya Mitchell, Anawari Mitchell and Thelma McLean piggy-back their tjanpi kids, 2009
Photo by Tim Acker
© Tjanpi Desert Weavers

Tommy and his Walu mural at the Giles Weather Station, 2008
Photo by Pamela Faye McGrath
© Pamela Faye McGrath

Kayili Art Centre Kids
Kids outside the Kayili art studio.
L to R: John Richards, Rachel Richards, Chloe Giles, Jaiden Giles, 2009
Photo by Tim Acker
© Kayili Artists
The Ngaanyatjarra Lands have produced some of Australia's greatest art and artists of recent times. But, located physically, artistically and historically between the foundation myths of Papunya and the commercial fervor for South Australia's Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjara Lands, the story of these artists and their art has not been told. This exhibition begins that story.

The artists of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands provide a new frame for audiences to better understand the dynamic artistry of desert people. In the Lands, painting emerges from, and is renewed by the enduring traditions of wood carving (purnu) and weaving (tjanpi). Regularly dismissed or under-valued as the 'crafty' cousins of the 'real art' of painting, purnu and tjanpi are the historical and conceptual foundations of creative practice in the Lands.

We learnt to do painting long after we had been doing purnu and tjanpi work. First we did purnu and then tjanpi and now, only lately we have been taking up painting.
Thelma McLean - Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands, p 17

Purnu means several things. It refers to the wood itself, the techniques of carving and shaping, and the finished object. These different dimensions reflect the great continuity of purnu through time, place and utility. Spears, shields, clubs and various carrying dishes were the primary survival technologies in desert life. But, as the economic foundations of desert life have changed over recent generations, so too did the function and place of the technologies within it. Ngaanyatjarra people have been carving objects out of wood for as long as they have been carving a life out of the desert. That tradition continues today, but in adapting to new circumstances, it is now creating new forms.

Grandfather learned father to make a miru (spear-thrower) around age 11 or 12. When he pass away - the grandfather and father – the son can take it on. That's how I learned. I was watching. They taught me miru. I was the first one now to make that bronze miru. Nobody ever did that – that's the first one.
Ernest Bennett - Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands, p 17

Tjanpi is a Nganyaatjarra word for grass, the weaving processes used and the finished objects that are made from it. Tjanpi has similar ancestry to purnu but has travelled, geographically and artistically, the furthest. Tjanpi has moved from its original, small-scale domestic uses, through to the inventive sculpture and installation work that explores and embraces so many aspects of contemporary community life. Tjanpi's strength is its community-oriented approach, which sees 4WD-loads of women and children moving though Country to collect grass and begin making the objects. The humour and playful innovation of tjanpi works reflects the distinctive contexts of its creation.
When I think back to our childhood days, we used to go off in the bush, after the rain when the grass was green, and everywhere flowers. We used to play; like pretend we’re fathers, mothers had babies, and the grass was the main one for us. Kids used to get the grass, make it into a little baby! Put t-shirt and trousers on it and play with it. Now when I think back, we were playing with grass too.

Maimie Butler - *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands*, p 162

Canvas is the most recent of the three mediums to be taken up in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Encouraged by earlier painting projects in Warburton and Irrunytju communities, the emergence of these four new art centres – Papulankutja, Kayili, Warakurna and Tjukurla – has forged a new school of western desert painting. Though grounded in the other creative practices of purnu and tjanpi, painting has now become the primary practice of most artists. However, despite the overwhelming focus of the art market on paintings, the great majority of artists still practice and move between the different mediums. In this, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands is different; purnu and tjanpi do not merely inform what painting became, but are complimentary creative practices that continue to shape what painting is.

This painting is very special to me. It will make a future for my children if I pass on. I’ve already taught my daughter. I’m passing my style, my Country, on to my daughter and granddaughter. My style will go into my daughter and granddaughter, they’ll take it on.

Anawari Mitchell - *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands*, p 187

When I have travelled away to other communities and towns in the past they have been only for a short time. During these short trips away from home I have always worked doing purnu, tjanpi and painting wherever I am. I am always working, always doing my paintings. I paint the Tjukurpa for my Country and my family’s Country for a long time now and later when I become too old and frail to paint, I think I will still force myself to continue painting.

Nola Campbell - *Ngaanyatjarra: Art of the Lands*, p 162
The works in this exhibition reflect the completeness of desert life, where people live on their Country, surrounded by a rich physical, cultural, social and mythical environment. The Ngaanyatjarra Lands are not ‘remote’ or ‘empty’ but continue to sustain a full and productive life for the 2000 people of the region. It is this prolific life, the artists who contribute to it and their infinite capacity to adapt new materials, reinvigorate their own traditions and experiment with mediums and traditions in ways that are truly ‘contemporary’ that is the story of this exhibition. The genius of Ngaanyatjarra art is not only in the forms it takes, but the forms of life it creates. From purnu to tjanpi to canvas, art is not merely an expression of Ngaanyatjarra culture, it is the very stuff of it.

_The Stories, the Truth and the Law are in the earth and the heavens – these white men know nothing of this. The land is not the same age as (the white man) and wasn’t born when he was born. This land was here from the beginning of time, and we Aboriginal men are its custodians._