"WE DIDN'T THINK YOU WAS COMIN' BACK": ART, FIELDWORK, AND HISTORY IN THE EAST KIMBERLEY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Heracleitus observed that it is impossible to step twice into the same river, yet the river remains over time. This paradox summarizes the relationship between anthropological fieldwork and ethnography. Entering the field is to experience a culture at one point in time. To write ethnography is to create a general analysis of that culture. Just as one can better understand a river's nature by observing it over time, one gains a more nuanced understanding of a culture through repeated episodes of fieldwork. Using examples from my research in the East Kimberley, Western Australia, I explore how the ongoing history of cultural phenomena affects the information collected about them. I argue that *when* one is in the field is as important as *what* one is investigating and that, to gain a fuller understanding of any cultural phenomenon, long-term fieldwork is essential.

THE GREEK PHILOSOPHER HERACLEITUS of Ephesus (ca. 540–480 B.C.) once observed that, because the waters are continually flowing, it is impossible to step twice into the same river. And yet, despite Heracleitus's observation, the river remains over time. Though recognizable as the same phenomenon, the river's course and level are variable, its meanderings slow but perceptible. A better paradox would be difficult to find to summarize the relationship between anthropological fieldwork and ethnography or describe the potential pitfalls of writing ethnography based on a single episode of fieldwork. To enter the field is to see a culture at one point in time—to step into the waters as they flow by. To write ethnography is, at least in classical anthropological conceptions, to create a deeper and broader analysis of that

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culture—to describe the river itself. Just as one can gain a fuller recognition of the river's changing nature by stepping into it several times, so too can one gain a better and more nuanced understanding of a culture through repeated periods of fieldwork.

Writing ethnography using material gathered at a single point in time is not without risks, both for anthropologists and, increasingly, for the people they study. As the recent history of interactions among ethnographic texts, governments, and indigenous peoples has often demonstrated, an ethnography has a strong tendency to become the de facto "official" record of a culture and its practices. *When* one is in the field has a profound influence on *what* one observes and, therefore, on how a culture or cultural phenomenon is ultimately understood and represented in anthropological discourses. As Fabian notes, "No experience can simply be 'used' as naked data. All personal experience [such as fieldwork] is produced under historical conditions, in historical contexts; it must be used with critical awareness and with constant attention to authoritative claims" (1983:89). An ethnography based on a single episode of fieldwork tends to become reified as the fixed and incontestable account of the institutions and beliefs of the culture throughout its history, but actually records the viewpoints, narratives, and agendas of individuals living at a specific point in time. It is as if a single observation of a river has been used to describe its level and course for all time: any alternative perceptions of the river or future changes to it are to be regarded as somehow invalid.

To understand the complex and historically contingent relationships among fieldwork, analysis, and ethnography—and the potential pitfalls of basing conclusions on a single period of fieldwork—does not, as some might assume, require generations or even decades. Subtle, even profound, changes that significantly affect cultural practices and expressions, and, consequently, how they are perceived and interpreted by an anthropological observer, can occur over a period as short as two or three years.

Both the rapidly changing nature of culture and the dangers of basing any interpretation (much less a complete ethnography) on fieldwork undertaken at a single point in time have become clear to me even during what has thus far been a relatively short period of "long-term" fieldwork among contemporary Aboriginal painters in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. During each of my four fieldwork visits in the area between 1994 and 2000,[1] a subtly, but appreciably, different picture of Aboriginal art as a cultural phenomenon has emerged. The passage of a year or two can, and often does, have a significant effect on the information collected, the cultural concerns expressed by the painters, and even the visual characteristics of the paintings themselves as the works and their creators become increasingly

entangled with the global art market. Using the continuing development of contemporary Aboriginal art in the East Kimberley as a case study, I examine how the ongoing history of cultural phenomena can affect the nature of information collected at any given point in time, even over a period as brief as six years. I argue that when one is in the field is as important as the topic one is investigating, and thus why, if anthropologists wish to claim a deeper understanding of any cultural phenomenon, it is essential to observe such phenomena not once, but over time.

Fieldwork in the East Kimberley

Located at the extreme northeastern corner of Western Australia, the East Kimberley region is home to a unique and largely self-contained movement within contemporary Aboriginal painting. Culturally, the East Kimberley includes the peoples of the eastern portion of the Kimberley and adjacent sections of the Northern Territory.[2] At its core lie the homelands of the Gija and Miriwoong peoples. Other local Aboriginal groups include the Gajirrawoong, Ngaliwurru, Jaminjung, and Jaru. Individuals from the more distant desert peoples of the interior live and paint in the region as well.

The peoples of the East Kimberley were originally hunter-gatherers. They lived in small, seminomadic bands of related individuals who moved from place to place within well-defined home territories. Today the region's Aboriginals live in permanent settlements. These consist of exclusively Aboriginal communities, such as Warmun (also known as Turkey Creek), as well as enclaves within larger towns, such as the Mirima Aborginal Community in Kununurra; and, increasingly, "outstations," small settlements established by one or more families who wish to live at particular locations within their traditional lands.

At present the contemporary painting movement in the East Kimberley encompasses roughly fifty painters living primarily in the Aboriginal communities at Warmun and Kununurra and their associated outstations. Distinct from the brightly colored Western Desert acrylics (or "dot" paintings) of the peoples to the south and the bark-painting traditions of Arnhem Land to the east, East Kimberley painting is characterized by the use of large areas of solid color set off from each other by dotted (or, more rarely, solid) borders of a lighter color, usually white (see Figure 1).[3]

Contemporary Aboriginal painting in the East Kimberley centers on the representation of *country* and *dreamings*, that is, the landscape and its mythic history. Every individual at birth inherits ownership rights to, and ceremonial responsibility for, particular portions of the territory owned by his or her language and/or kin group. These tracts are known in Kriol (Aboriginal

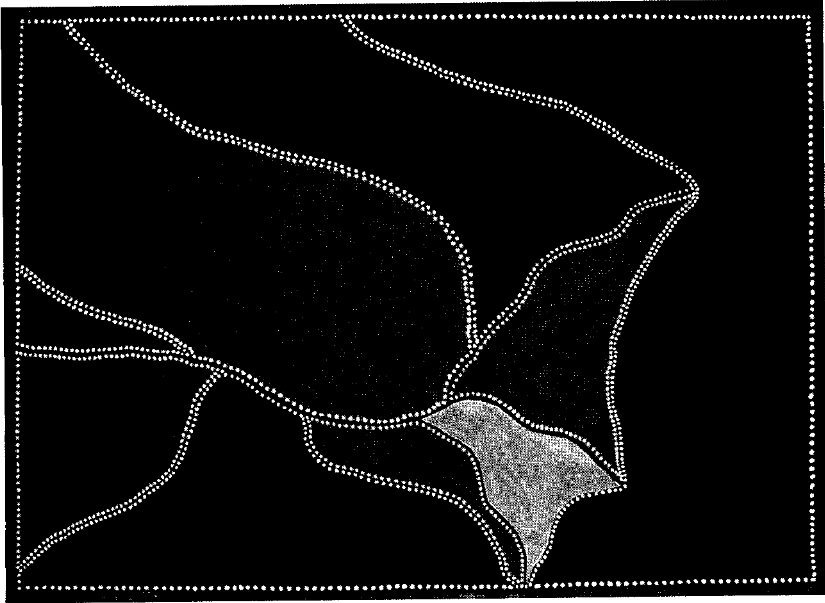

FIGURE 1. **Freddy Timms, ca. 1995, "Bow River Country," ochre on canvas.**

English) as *country*. Although Aboriginals in the region today often live in permanent settlements distant from their traditional homelands, *country* remains central to Aboriginal identity and religion.

Each individual *country* is associated with one or more *dreamings*, the ancestral beings and events that created or shaped its physical features during the *dreaming*, or creation period,[4] and whose creative (and destructive) power is still present at specific sites within in the landscape. In Aboriginal cosmologies *dreaming* beings, *dreaming* sites, and the narratives that describe them are all aspects of a single phenomenon. Thus, the word *dreaming* can be used to refer equally and interchangeably to the initial creation period, a supernatural being from that period, a feature of the landscape created by that being, and the songs or narratives that describe its creation. A lightning *dreaming*, for instance, might be manifest as an outcrop of rocks, an anthropomorphic being, a song or story describing that being or its associated sites, an actual lightning bolt, or all four simultaneously. Both *country* and *dreamings* also have different layers of meanings expressed in songs, stories, and ceremonies. Many of these meanings are public and can be told to anyone. Others, particularly those that deal with male and female ritu-

als, are considered sacred and secret, and knowledge of them is restricted to the initiated. To reveal secret-sacred knowledge contained within a story or ritual to a general audience, either through speech or visually through a painting, is a serious violation of Aboriginal *law* that warrants potentially severe punishment.[5]

As described by many painters, the money they receive for their work is perceived as payment for imparting the (partial) knowledge of the *dreamings* and *country* they portray rather than for the image itself. While the intended non-Aborginal consumers of the work think they are buying the image, the painter frequently believes he or she is selling the knowledge of myth and landscape on which that image is based.

The historically-contingent nature of contemporary East Kimberley painting as a cultural phenomenon is profoundly demonstrated by the fact that thirty years ago it did not exist. Though some community elders participated in the creation of rock paintings in their youth and individuals continued to adorn their bodies for ceremonies, by the early 1970s few if any Aboriginals in the area painted on a regular basis. In the mid 1970s, however, the situation began to change, due not to a revival of earlier rock-art traditions but, surprisingly, as the result of an auto accident.

In late 1974 a local Aboriginal woman was critically injured in a truck rollover near Warmun and died as she was being airlifted to a hospital in the Western Australian capital of Perth. About a month later her spirit "visited" Rover Thomas, a desert-born Aboriginal man who had settled among the Gija people of Warmun, in a series of dreams. On her visits she gave him the songs associated with a *corroboree* (song and dance performance) known as the Goorirr Goorirr. During performances of the Goorirr Goorirr, dancers carry painted boards depicting places and events described in the songs. These boards, along with a series of paintings illustrating local *country* and *dreamings* created by community elders for the newly established school at Warmun, became the sources of the contemporary painting movement.

When East Kimberley paintings came to the attention of the art world in the early 1980s, painters were encouraged by art dealers to produce works on canvas for sale to non-Aboriginals. A commercial market for the painting gradually developed. In the years that followed, an increasing number of East Kimberley Aboriginals began to paint, not solely as a source of additional income but also, according to their own statements, as a means of perpetuating knowledge of the *country* and *dreamings* their works portray. By the mid 1990s East Kimberley painting had grown to become an established and widely recognized regional school within contemporary Aboriginal art.[6]

My own association with Aboriginal painters in the East Kimberley began in 1994, when I made a brief trip to Kununurra to investigate the nature

and extent of contemporary painting in the region and discuss the prospects of returning for a more extended period of research. In 1995 I returned to spend a year in the region working closely with Waringarri Arts, a cooperative owned by the local Aboriginal community. To make me useful to the cooperative, I was assigned the task of recording the mythology or "story" associated with each painting as the artist brought it in to sell. This entailed listening to and tape-recording the story in Kriol, then writing a brief summary in standard English. The summary of the painting's story subsequently became part of the documentation, which accompanied each painting as it was sold and served, to an art world audience, as a marker of the painting's authorship and "authenticity" (see Kjellgren 1999:273–280). My role as "story man" proved critical in developing relationships with the Aboriginal painters in Kununurra and Warmun, virtually all of whom at that time sold their work through Waringarri Arts.

During the course of 1995–1996 I worked closely with about a dozen painters, primarily through informal interviews, most of which were tape-recorded. Through my conversations with them I sought to understand the social, political, and religious dynamics of contemporary painting within local Aboriginal communities as well as the painters' perspectives on the wider (and almost entirely non-Aboriginal) art world for which their works were ultimately destined.

In mid 1996 a second, privately owned "cooperative," Warmun Traditional Arts (later renamed Narangunny Arts), was established at Warmun. A number of the most prominent artists in the movement, including Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, Freddy Timms, Jack Britten, and Hector Jandalu (all of whom lived in or near Warmun), subsequently began to paint for this second cooperative, where I was able to conduct additional interviews.[7]

I left the field in 1996 with a number of preliminary conclusions about the nature and importance of contemporary painting in the local Aboriginal communities. First, that by far the most important aspects of Aboriginal paintings to their original creators are the content and ownership of subject matter (their *country* and *dreamings*) rather than visual characteristics. Additionally, though the art world was perceived as an alien phenomenon of little relevance to their lives, East Kimberley painters nonetheless remained concerned with the ultimate destination of their work and the ways in which it was displayed (see below).

Despite increasing competition between the two local businesses that marketed the art, the contemporary painting movement itself appeared to be thriving at the end of 1996, although the fact that nearly all the painters were in their seventies raised concerns about its long-term viability. Within the movement each artist had developed a highly recognizable individual

style, which appeared to be relatively stable. There was, however, already beginning to be an observable movement among artists who had initially painted in a "representational" style, depicting human and animal figures in their work, toward creating more "abstract" images, in large measure attributable to the higher prices "abstract" paintings commanded (and continue to command) on the art market (discussed below).

When I next visited the East Kimberley in 1998, a number of painters expressed genuine (and I hoped pleasant) surprise that I had made good on my promise to return. One artist, meeting me by chance in Warmun, even told me explicitly, "We didn't think you was coming back." I came back, however, to discover both the production and marketing of art in the region increasingly fragmented and acrimonious. From essentially one centralized art wholesaler in 1995, by 1998 no fewer than five had emerged (or were emerging): two private and three Aboriginal-owned. These five separate entities all actively competed to control the marketing of works by the dozen or so best-known artists (whose paintings can sell wholesale for several thousand Australian dollars apiece). Competition and demand for East Kimberley painting had increased dramatically over the previous two years, but the number of painters had not. Apart from a few "new" painters (most in their sixties or older), the movement continued to depend primarily on the efforts of a small core group drawn from the original painters, most of whom were now in their mid to late seventies. That same year saw the deaths of Rover Thomas, cofounder of the contemporary painting movement, and Queenie McKenzie, the East Kimberley's most renowned woman artist, substantially reducing both the number as well as the national and international profile of East Kimberley painters. I left the field in 1998 discouraged, with the impression that the movement was slowly dying out as an ever-growing number of dealers squabbled over an ever-diminishing number of painters, at times dividing communities and creating bad feelings in the process.

I returned in 2000, however, to find the contemporary painting movement rejuvenated. The number of painters and paintings in the area was on the rise. Though the five competing wholesalers remained, there now appeared to be an uneasy truce among them. At Warmun, the staff of the Warmun Art Centre, a community-owned cooperative, had been actively seeking out and encouraging younger artists and at least a dozen new painters, ranging in age from their late twenties to their early sixties, were now creating works on a regular basis. In Kununurra, a group of painters from the nearby outstation community of Emu Creek, encouraged by the privately owned wholesaler Red Rock Arts, had begun to create a great variety of works, which together constituted a distinctive new subtradition within East Kimberley painting. Where two years before, the contemporary painting movement appeared

moribund, it was now expanding so fast that simply recording the names and representative works of all the emerging artists required a significant investment of time and effort.

Throughout my fieldwork in the East Kimberley an important factor affecting the quantity, depth, and type of information I obtained has been the continually developing nature of my relationships with the painters themselves. These sorts of ongoing relationships are another factor made possible only through repeated periods of fieldwork. As I continued to return to the East Kimberley, I built up a greater degree of trust with certain individuals. This resulted in my being told more (and, in some instances, different kinds of) information about the religious and mythological background of contemporary paintings than the painters had been willing to reveal during my initial fieldwork. Some of this information was secret-sacred in nature and therefore cannot be published. However, the great majority of it consisted of fuller and more nuanced accounts of diverse nonsecret aspects of Aboriginal culture that proved invaluable to me in attempting to understand the subtle and complex social dynamics of Aboriginal painting.

Against this shifting backdrop of social, economic, and interpersonal factors, as I continued to return to the field I observed that both the painters and the visual characteristics of their works were also continually changing. Both the imagery in East Kimberley painting and its creators' perspectives on the non-Aboriginal art world for which their works are destined have changed markedly within the six-year period in which I have been documenting them. As examples of the historically contingent nature of the relationships between observation and the ethnographic project, specific instances of historical change in the East Kimberley can be useful in examining how they have affected my own observations (and interpretations) of East Kimberley painting as a cultural phenomenon.

Same *Country*, Different Way: The Movement to "Abstraction"

One of the most obvious changes in the nature of East Kimberley painting over the course of my research (or at least so I initially thought) has been the movement by many artists from "representational" to "abstract" imagery. Both the earlier rock-art traditions and many of the first contemporary paintings in the East Kimberley appear (to non-Aboriginal eyes) primarily "representational" in nature. They contain recognizable, if stylized, images of humans, animals, and supernatural beings. Shortly after I began my fieldwork in 1995, however, many painters began to slowly shift to creating works that contain no immediately recognizable figures or motifs, and thus are perceived as "abstract" by non-Aboriginal observers.[8] This profound shift oc-

curred largely as a response by Aboriginal painters to the preferences of the non-Aboriginal consumers for whom the works are ultimately destined.

At least one scholar, in discussing Western Desert acrylic paintings, has implied that contemporary Aboriginal painting likely owes a great measure of its acceptance and popularity in the art world to its (superficial) resemblance to Western abstraction (see Michaels 1994:154–157). Through the perception and representation of Aboriginal paintings as "abstract," dealers, critics, and collectors re-present the unfamiliar (Aboriginal paintings) in terms of the familiar (abstract art), linking them with a specific set of discourses through which they can be understood by a Western audience.

The high cultural and commercial value accorded to abstract art by the contemporary art world translates directly to the values accorded by dealers, critics, and collectors to Aboriginal paintings (and painters) in the East Kimberley. With rare exceptions, works by individuals from the Warmun community, such as Rover Thomas, Freddy Timms, and Queenie McKenzie,[9] which appear abstract to the Western gaze (see Figure 1), attract more critical attention (and command higher prices) than those of Kununurra painters, who often include representational imagery. Abstract works by any artist are also widely regarded as more marketable than examples that incorporate human or animal figures. For this reason, the inclusion of representational images in paintings is, in some instances, discouraged by art coordinators.

During my initial fieldwork in 1995–1996, a number of painters in Kununurra began to respond to these market preferences and were in the process of changing the imagery in their paintings from works that included human and animal figures to more abstract compositions resembling those of successful Warmun painters. This trend is readily apparent in the work of Paddy Carlton. Comparing Carlton's 1993 canvas "Man Drowned by Two Rainbow Snakes in the Dreamtime" (Figure 2), for example, with his late 1995 work "Possum, Lightning and Dingo Dreaming," (Figure 3), one is immediately struck with the fact that the first consists wholly of naturalistic images (a man, a crocodile, two snakes) while the second appears entirely abstract and strongly (if superficially) resembles the work of Warmun painter Queenie McKenzie.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the shift from representational to abstract images by painters in Kununurra can be seen in the work of Alan and Peggy Griffiths. While most works by these artists are attributed to one or the other of them individually, the Griffithses, a married couple, often collaborate in the production of paintings, which is common practice among Aboriginal painters in the East Kimberley and elsewhere. When I first met the Griffithses in 1995, their strongly figural work depicted landforms such as caves and waterholes, surrounded by images of the plants, animals, and

supernatural beings associated with them (Figure 4). When I returned in 1998, I found their work had undergone a complete visual transformation. The two continued to depict the same subjects, but all trace of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery had disappeared. The landforms themselves were so highly stylized that they appear totally abstract (Figure 5), occasionally resembling the work of Warmun's most celebrated abstract painter, Rover Thomas (a personal friend of Alan Griffiths).

By the end of my field season in 1998, the trend toward abstraction seemed firm and virtually universal. Had I returned permanently to the United States and written up the results of my research based solely on the information from these two episodes of fieldwork, an account of historical change might have resulted that, while significant, followed a predictable course. The imagery of East Kimberley painting appeared to be changing from representational to abstract, and the change appeared to be unidirectional. Thus when I returned in 2000, I expected to find the Griffithses and other Kununurra painters continuing to create the abstract images so appealing to non-Aboriginals. The Griffithses, however, had other ideas.

As soon as I saw their latest works in 2000, I realized that the Griffithses had once again radically transformed their style. In contrast to the stark, minimal landscapes of 1998, their paintings now abounded with tiny human figures, in some instances dozens on a single canvas, dressed in ceremonial finery and engaged in elaborate *corroboree* performances. Furthermore, the figures did not represent a reversion to the earlier style of 1995–1996 but were a new type, reminiscent of the work of the innovative Western Desert painter Mary McLean.[10] Within the space of two years—at least in the case of Alan and Peggy Griffiths—the trend toward greater abstraction had been completely reversed. What had first appeared to be a straightforward aspect of contemporary East Kimberley art proved, with the passing of more time, far more complex.

The examination of what was, in retrospect, a somewhat illusory "movement toward abstraction" among East Kimberley painters makes clear the historically contingent nature of Aboriginal art as a cultural phenomenon, as well as the dangers of attempting to produce a general account from a single episode (or even two) of fieldwork conducted within a relatively brief period of time. An ethnography drawing solely on information from 1995–1996, for example, might describe an inherent contrast between the representational works of Kununurra and the abstract works of Warmun, perhaps interpreted as an effort by artists in each community to assert a distinctive identity. An account based on 1995–1996 and 1998, conversely, would describe a widespread trend toward abstraction and, thus, a growing homogeneity and unity between the art of the two communities. An observer visiting the region only

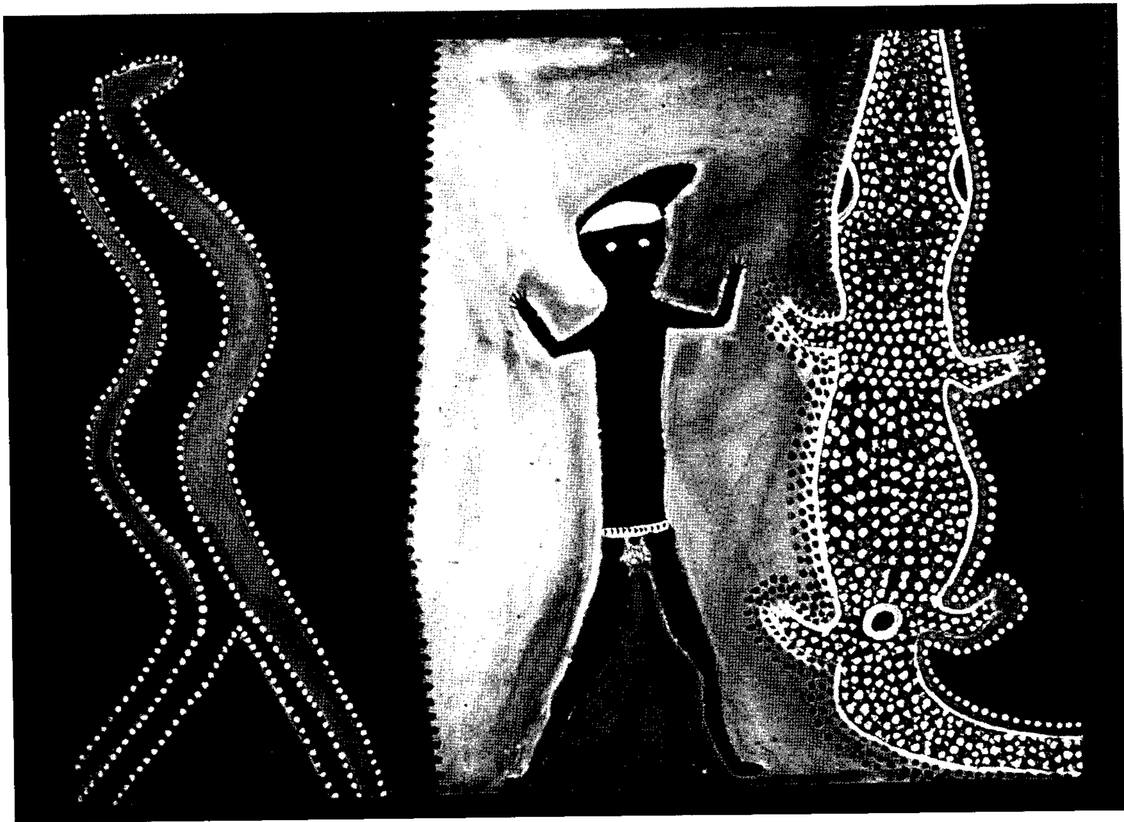

FIGURE 2. **Paddy Carlton, ca. 1994, "Man Drowned by Two Rainbow Snakes in the Dreamtime," ochre on canvas.**

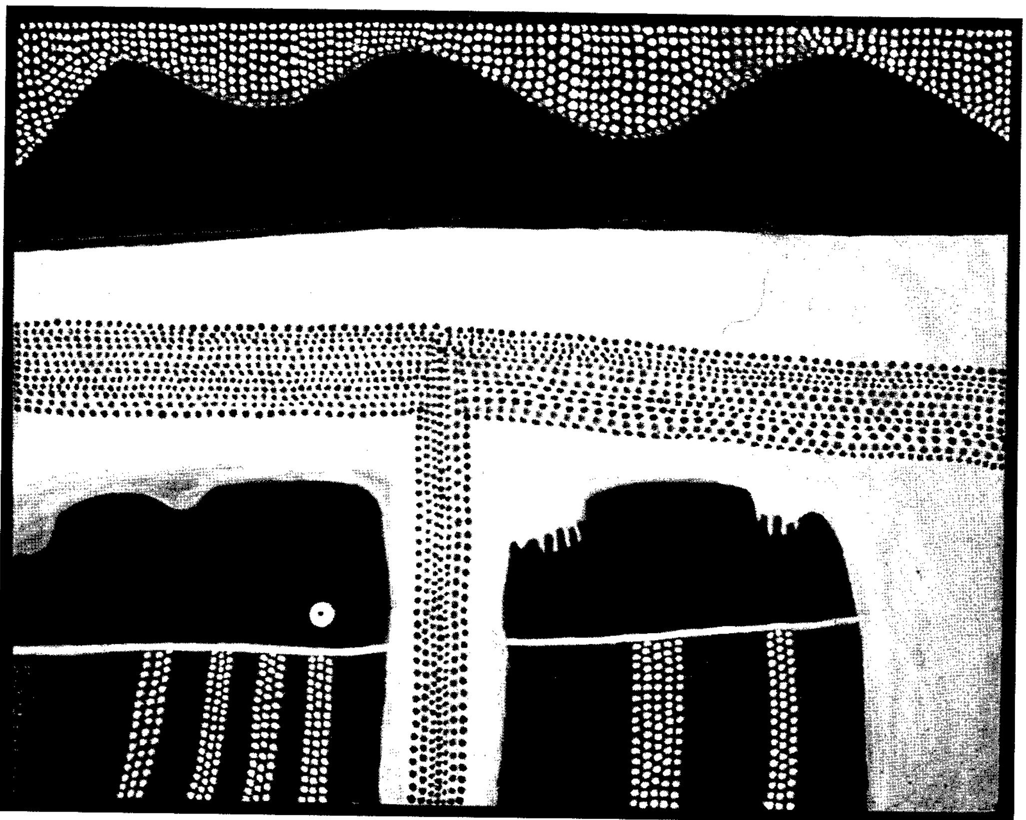

FIGURE 3. **Paddy Carlton, 1995, "Possum, Lightning and Dingo Dreaming—Bool-oobiloobi Country," ochre on canvas.**

FIGURE 4. **Alan Griffiths, ca. 1995, "Jasper Gorge Country," ochre on canvas.**

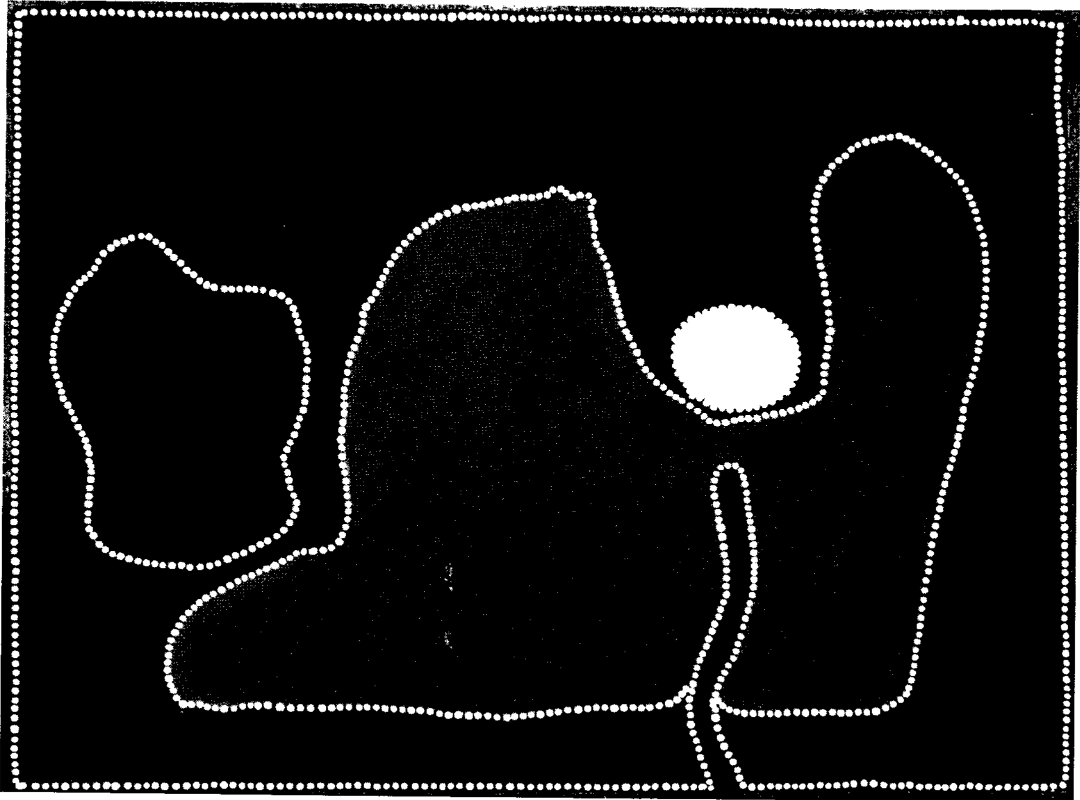

FIGURE 5. **Alan Griffiths, 1998, "Full Moon," ochre on canvas.**

in 1998 could, with some justification, characterize all East Kimberley painting as abstract; while a second, visiting Kununurra in 1995–1996 and 2000 (but not 1998) could just as rationally characterize much of its painting as representational. The same phenomenon, sampled during one or more discrete episodes during a six-year period, has the potential to produce radically different results, which in turn would likely lead to significantly different interpretations (and representations) of local Aboriginal culture on the part of a non-Aboriginal observer.

Display and the Dead

Just as the imagery of East Kimberley painting changes through time, so too do the perspectives and, to some extent, the cultural practices of the painters. As East Kimberley painting has gained increasing recognition in the global art world over the past two decades, a growing number of painters have had the opportunity to visit museums and private collections exhibiting their work. Observing how their works are displayed by their non-Aboriginal owners, painters subsequently express a range of concerns, many of which reflect cultural priorities that clash directly with the conventions and practices of the art world. Painters frequently regret in particular that representations of local *dreamings* now reside far from their home *country*. But, as is also the case with Aboriginal painters from Arnhem Land and the Western Desert, a more prominent issue among East Kimberley painters concerns the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of displaying paintings by deceased individuals.

In the mainstream art world, discourse typically emphasizes a painter's legacy, in which an artist's work serves as a lasting monument to his or her artistic achievement and form a permanent part of museum displays and collections. But such Western notions of artistic immortality directly contradict conventions of respect for the dead in many Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal *law* in the East Kimberley customarily calls for the destruction of all images of a deceased person and all his or her belongings, and forbids the living to utter his or her name. In recent years this situation has been gradually changing, at least in regards to photographs and possessions. In 1996, for example, Warmun painter Shirley Purdie, although explicitly noting that the *law* requires that the possessions of the dead be destroyed, described telling her children that it was permissible to keep photographs of her as well as her paintings after her death: "Like all my kids now. I tell them, you know. Before might be anything happen to me....They can keep my photo, they can keep my painting, I tell them now. [In former times] they used to burnim up, you know....You can't keep anything. But now, you know [it's different], because kids now growin' up more or less like a *kar-*

tiya[11] now...and they like to keep things for remembering" (Shirley Purdie, interview, 26 June 1996).

During this interview, nonetheless, Purdie did express concern about the (in)appropriateness of displaying paintings by deceased artists in museums and galleries. Asked her thoughts on seeing a group of paintings on exhibit at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, she specifically mentioned being "worried" about the inclusion of works by Warmun painter Paddy Jaminji, who had recently died (note that she does not mention him by name): "That old fella one really. That we lost here [Jaminji]....Yeah, we saw his one [painting] there. Yeah, bit worried what, you know....You do your painting and painting he'll be still there. Yeah, really we don't know. Can't help really." To judge from my 1996 interview with Purdie, the practice of displaying paintings by deceased artists in museums and art galleries was at best unsettling and at worst offensive to those Aboriginals who continue to practice the customary proscriptions associated with the dead.

Over the next four years Purdie's opinion on the issue underwent a noticeable change. When I interviewed her about the same topic in 2000, she began by expressing the notion that keeping and displaying paintings by deceased people in museums was appropriate because it preserves the memory of the dead for their descendants. Significantly, she prefaced the statement by noting that this was her own idea:

> Well,...my idea, I reckon he's alright [to display works by deceased individuals], you know, long as they there for when people want to [see them]....Like the old people now, when they [are] gone....Well, if they [their] painting there, you know, we can still see it. The ones they keepim there [in the museum], you know. That's for remember the old people. Well, that's same as us [living painters], you know. If we finish [die], well, might be our children or...some family want to seeim [the paintings]. They can now. Long as he's there for all the time. (Shirley Purdie, interview, 12 July 2000)

More interestingly, she subsequently went on to give a substantially different account of the customary Aboriginal prohibitions regarding the works of the dead than she had in 1996—one that can accommodate both Western and Aboriginal customs. According to her 2000 description of Aboriginal *law*, works by deceased individuals, rather than being permanently withdrawn (and, ideally, destroyed), can be displayed following an appropriate period of mourning after the heavy rains of the Wet Season[12] have cleansed the land, as seen in this excerpt:

E.K: So it's okay [now] to have paintings up there [in museums] from people who bin pass away, or what?

S.P.: Yeah, well some family, you know, they don't worry [about it]. Long as they reckon that's good memory, you know.

E.K: But *early days*[13] different, eh?

S.P.: Different *early days*, yeah. They bin always puttim [paintings] away.... Till might be two year then they puttim out [again]....They say when rain season come, you know, rain time. He wash all the thing away from them old people bin passed away. Alright, the next new year time he'll be right. That's what the old people used to say, you know. After the rain, well, he'll be alright....They think that rain he's wash [away] everything, you know, like [a human or animal] track.... (Ibid.)

The notable differences not only in Purdie's personal perspective on the subject but also in her account of relevant Aboriginal *law* again highlight the historically contingent nature of Aboriginal painting as a cultural phenomenon in the East Kimberley. Had I written an account of painters' attitudes toward the display of works by deceased artists based solely on my 1995–1996 fieldwork (as I did when I wrote my doctoral dissertation), I would have concluded (as, indeed, I then did) that the display of such works was problematic, even unacceptable, to members of the local Aboriginal communities (see Kjellgren 1999:327).

Reexamining the same topic with the same person in 2000 lead to a very different conclusion: that, although stated by Aboriginals in the East Kimberley to be permanent and unchanging, *law* exhibits considerable flexibility, allowing it to accommodate, on Aboriginal cultural terms, the growing interaction between local peoples and the global art world. While it is uncertain if every member of the Gija community would agree that the display of works by (or images of) deceased artists is appropriate, the consensus among the artists themselves now appears to be that it is. This point was made explicitly clear to me again when I was with a group of Gija painters in Sydney at the opening of the exhibition "True Stories: Art of the East Kimberley" in January 2003. When I asked them if I could show images of deceased artists and their paintings in a slide lecture at the opening symposium, they unanimously agreed that it was permissible to do so. The nature of *law* and other cultural practices as dynamic rather than static phenomena has become increasingly apparent through examining such issues historically, made possible by repeated episodes of fieldwork. Conclusions that seemed firm after my initial period of fieldwork must now be approached with caution.

Conclusion

This brief examination of the relationship between history, culture, and Aboriginal painting in the East Kimberley readily reveals the complex and problematic entanglement of history with the ethnographic project. Although the changes I have described are among the more significant I have observed in my four trips to the region between 1994 and 2000, numerous subtler changes are continually transforming the social (and physical) manifestations of this unique tradition within contemporary Aboriginal art. Had I (or another researcher) attempted to create an account of the contemporary painting movement based on the classical anthropological method of making a single trip to the area, the *when* of that trip would clearly have had a major effect on the nature of information recorded and, therefore, on any subsequent interpretations and texts concerning Aboriginal painting as a cultural phenomenon.

Even in a period as brief as six years, the risks of creating a general account of East Kimberley art from information gathered at any given moment—to describe the river after having stepped into it only once—are immediately evident. Many factors are constantly, at times radically, changing: the participants in the movement, its relative vigor, relationships to and perspectives of the painters on the art world, even the visual characteristics of the paintings. These changes become visible only through multiple fieldwork visits separated, at least to some degree, by time.

In this essay I have deliberately stressed instances of change and historicity, providing case studies of the differences I have observed over time among the painters and painting of the East Kimberley. Long-term fieldwork reveals the changing nature of many cultural phenomena; equally important, it also reveals aspects of culture that are constant, or at least changing at far slower rates. In the East Kimberley these include factors such as the central importance of *country* and *dreamings*, not simply to contemporary painting but also to individual identity and, increasingly, to contemporary land politics. While the ways that *country* and *dreamings* are portrayed in East Kimberley painting have clearly changed over time, their centrality as its subject matter remains, and is likely to remain, constant. Multiple periods of fieldwork over time have thus been invaluable to me in distinguishing what are essentially passing fashions from truly enduring cultural institutions.

NOTES

In preparing this article I want to thank, first and foremost, the painters and other Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley who have continued to allow me to share their

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1. Ever since first undertaking intensive fieldwork in the East Kimberley in 1995–1996, I have intended to make a long-term study of the continuing history, evolution, and cultural significance of contemporary Aboriginal art in the region. I have had the opportunity to return to the region in 1998 and 2000, and plan to continue to do so in the future.

2. While the literature on the region and its peoples remains relatively scant, important sources on the cultures of the East Kimberley include Kaberry 1939; Kimberley Language Resource Centre 1996; Kjellgren 1999, 2002; Ryan 2001; Shaw 1981, 1986, 1992; and Stewart 1999.

3. For surveys and discussion of contemporary Aboriginal painting and painters in the East Kimberley, see Ian Potter Museum of Art 2002; Kjellgren 1999, 2002; Ryan and Akerman 1992; Stanton 1989; Thomas et al. 1994; and Watson 2002.

4. In literature, this era of initial creation is frequently called the *dreamtime;* the term is occasionally used by Aboriginal Kriol speakers as well. Most recent authors and Aboriginal Australians prefer *dreaming*, which better reflects belief that its supernatural power is an ongoing phenomenon that is not confined to a finite period in the distant past.

5. The Kriol term *law* denotes the sacred corpus of rules and customs established during the *dreaming* by which Aboriginal people are expected to live their lives and which governs their relations to other members of the group and the natural and supernatural worlds.

6. See works by Kjellgren for a detailed account of the origins of the contemporary painting movement in the East Kimberley (1999:168–202; 2002).

7. The decision of these and other painters to paint for this second cooperative was motivated in part by convenience (to visit Waringarri Arts in Kununurra requires traveling more than two hundred kilometers from Warmun). It may also reflect the desire of Warmun residents, most of whom are from the Gija language group, to sell their work from a source located in a Gija community rather than through Waringarri Arts, which is owned by the Miriwoong language group.

8. The apparent abstraction of these paintings is purely superficial. Both abstract and representational canvases depict the same subject matter, differing only in how the artist chooses to represent the underlying *dreaming* or *country* in a particular work.

9. The works of Thomas and Timms are often described as abstract or minimalist, but a number of their paintings, particularly Thomas's earlier works, contain representational

images of birds, *dreaming* beings, and other figures (see, e.g., Thomas et al. 1994:10). McKenzie also occasionally incorporated small human figures into her landscapes throughout her career.

10. This resemblance may not have been entirely coincidental, as I remember seeing a poster of one of McLean's paintings on the wall at Waringarri Arts.

11. The Kriol noun *kartiya* refers to a person of European ancestry or, when used as an adjective, to any object, plant, animal, concept, or practice derived from Western as opposed to Aboriginal culture.

12. The annual rainy season, also simply "The Wet," which occurs between November and March.

13. The Kriol expression *early days* here refers to the period before European contact when Aboriginal people, according to their contemporary descendants, lived entirely according to the precepts of customary law.

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