

Lorna Ward Napanangka, Yukultji Napangati, and John West Tjupurrula

By Tamsin Hong, Exhibitions Curator at Serpentine

Written on the occasion of Portals to Place: Three Papunya Tula Artists at Edel Assanti, London, UK

Lorna Ward Napanangka, Yukultji Napangati, and John West Tjupurrula are three living Pintupi artists working as part of the Papunya Tula Artists cooperative located in the red desert centre of the land now known as Australia. The pioneering cooperative was formed in 1972 in Papunya, 240 kilometres west of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) in the Northern Territory during the time of Australia's assimilation policies. It is a company entirely owned and directed by Aboriginal people from the Western Desert, predominantly of the Luritja and Pintupi language groups. Now with two centres, one at Walungurru (Kintore) and the other at Kiwirrkurra, Papunya Tula Artists established an artist centre model that has been replicated in many Aboriginal communities as a structure to continue over 65,000 years of the oldest continuous living cultures through visual arts. The Papunya Tula Artists initiated the Western Desert Art movement which gained its distinction for translating ceremonial body and sand markings to acrylic paintings and responding to global artistic developments. The first generation of artists established protocols to protect sacred symbols. They achieved this through their careful monitoring of designs in order to maintain the integrity of ancestral creation stories, which are shared through ceremonial initiation and kept secret from an uninitiated audience. Napanangka, Napangati, and Tjupurrula continue and reinterpret these stories today, maintaining protocols, and expanding the Western Desert visual lexicon.

Napanangka and Napangati both began painting in 1996 as part of the first generation of women painters to join the Papunya Tula Artists. Born in 1961, Napanangka is the daughter of Timmy Payungka Tjapangardi, a first-generation artist of the Papunya Tula Artists, and Margaret Nampitjinpa from the Umari area. Napanangka primarily paints the site of Marrapinti, located to the west of the Kiwirrkurra community. Marrapinti is a significant women's site, being the location of ceremonies conducted by ancestral beings. Napanangka's painting practice is integrated in her role as an elder and custodian of Country, enabling her to share knowledge with current and future generations. Early in her career she established a distinctive visual language of fine dotting in white paint onto black or brown backgrounds which has influenced other Pintupi artists, including Yukultji Napangati. In recent years, Napanangka has transformed this technique in response to the onset of Parkinson's disease and now paints with brushes to create energetic thick lines. She has also expanded her colour palette to evoke the hues of her desert Country. Her expanding practice demonstrates its potency both in its capacity to adapt to her physical changes and also as a reflection of her deepening knowledge and confidence as an Elder. The blurring between dotting and line making gives her recent paintings a vibrational quality, infusing her canvases with the energy of Country and the ancient stories she holds.

Napangati has expanded Napanangka's fine dotting to depict Marrapinti and other sites, adapting this technique into her own distinctive style. She was born around 1971 at Marawa, a site located to the west of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay), northwest of the Kiwirrkurra community. As is consistent across Papunya Tula Artists, Napangati's oeuvre centres on Tjukurrpa. Tjukurrpa is a term used by Western Desert peoples and is difficult to translate to Western ontology, but can be conceived as referring to the spiritual philosophy which connects people to the environment and ancestors, with stories tracing back to the beginning of time. These stories contain important lessons and knowledge about the land, survival, law, and relationships to all living beings. It refers to the past, present and future at the same time, sometimes referred to as 'everywhen', in contrast to linear notions of time. As is customary, Napangati's practice is drawn from inherited matrilineal Tjukurrpa and she often paints at home with her family around her, particularly her daughters. Her use of dotted lines to create waves of optical movement evokes the rippling tali (sand dunes) of her homelands in the Gibson Desert, north of Kiwirrkurra, near the great salt lake Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) in Western Australia. Her daughter, Jodie Napurrula Ward explained, 'My mum, Yukultji Napangati, paints the Marrapinti story. And I've started painting it too. I tell the story for Marrapinti because of my grandmothers – that's their Tjukurrpa, that's their Dreaming. It's just for the women.' Through her daughter and other younger kin, Napangati shares in the collective continuation of these sacred matrilineal stories, ensuring these ancient and present knowledge systems continue, and sharing them to a broader audience through her rippling, evocative canvases.

Tjupurrula is the youngest of the three artists and comes from a family of highly regarded Papunya Tula artists including his father Freddy West Tjakamarra, mother Payu Napaltjarri, and brother Bobby West Tjupurrula. Born in 1982 in the nascent community of Kintore, which at the time was little more than a bore and a collection of tents, he now lives and works with his

family in Kiwirrkurra. West Tjupurrula's artistic practice is entwined with his other roles which includes working at the Kiwirrkurra school teaching two-way science, which integrates Pintupi philosophy of teaching and learning with Western education. He is also a ranger working in land management, continuing to take care of and maintain his connection to Country. Tjupurrula's practice is distinctive for its evolution of dot painting to incorporate drone imagery, regularly painting the sites Winpulpula and Palipalintja. After he experienced his first helicopter trip he explained, 'Seeing my Country from above changed my style, and now I paint my Country that way.' Using drone footage of Kiwirrkurra Country, Tjupurrula paints using a double dotting technique whereby he uses two sticks in one hand to create a patterning effect. He explains his use of reds, oranges, whites, and yellows: 'I chose colours that reminded me of the landscape at that place.' These works evoke both the geological formations and ancient stories of his Country, blurring between the veins, pools, and peaks of Country with ancestral beings. Tjupurrula's recent paintings are associated with the Tingari song-cycle. This is closely-guarded and restricted knowledge held in stories which capture the movements and activities of ancestral beings of the Tjukurrpa through sacred songlines.

These three artists are connected through Pintupi language and the ancient knowledges of Tjukurrpa, yet each artist presents a distinctive approach to telling these sacred stories of Country, infusing their canvases with intergenerational love of their family and custodianship for their lands. Napanangka, Napangati, and Tjupurrula demonstrate the continued evolution of Papunya Tula Artists and the Western Desert movement, responding to the changes in Country, stylistic developments, and advancements in technology to create new visual languages as part of one of Australia's most influential art centres.