



About this Education Kit

This resource is designed to assist teachers in preparing students viewing the exhibition as well as provide a selection of research activities appropriate for both primary and secondary level students working in the exhibition.

About the exhibition

Comprising 48 paintings and 2 sculptures by the artist, the exhibition includes masterpieces drawn from public collections around the nation and private collections in Australia, Europe and America, reflecting Clifford Possum's international success. Nearly three years in the making, the Clifford Possum exhibition is the first major touring retrospective of any Papunya Western Desert painter's work.

Clifford Possum led a groundbreaking career and was the first Indigenous Australian artist to be recognised and fêted by the international art world. When his iconic work, *Man's Love Story*, 1978 was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1980 it became the first 'dot' painting to enter a major public art collection. Like Albert Namatjira before him, Clifford Possum blazed a trail for future generations of Indigenous artists; bridging the gap between Aboriginal art and contemporary Australian art.

Meet the artist

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c1934 – 2002)

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was born in a creek bed about 200 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. He spent his childhood in the company of his extended family, living off their own country in the manner of their ancestors. He received no formal education and started working as a station hand by the time he was initiated into Anmatyerre manhood. In the early 1950s he turned down Albert Namatjira's offer to teach him to paint European style watercolours of the Central Australian landscape. He preferred woodcarving, which he had begun in his late teens and continued until the early 1970s while working as an itinerant stockman.

During his time working as a stockman the remote government settlement of Papunya, 250 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs became a home base for his growing family. It was here that the art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon encouraged the elder men to transfer ancient ceremonial designs, hitherto drawn in the sand or in natural ochres on their bodies, onto boards painted with professional artists' colours. In February 1972 during one of Clifford Possum's return visits to Papunya he joined this group of painters (shortly after incorporated as Papunya Tula Artists). Papunya painting emerged as one of the

most powerful movements in recent Australian art history, of which Clifford Possum was both a precursor and a pioneer.

Over three decades of continuous productivity, he remained a leading figure and proponent of this Western Desert 'dot' painting style that he had helped to invent and nurture. With his first solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1988, he became the first Australian Aboriginal artist to be feted in international art circles.

The hard-won acceptance of Western Desert painters as both the priests of an ancient culture and contemporary artists of international stature was built on the outstanding achievements of individuals such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. In the last decade of his life, the artist bravely embraced the role of an independent ambassador for his art and culture. He became the most widely known and travelled Aboriginal artist of his generation; and perhaps the most charismatic. This national touring retrospective exhibition is a tribute to the life's work of this extraordinary man and artist.

Exhibition content and design

The exhibition design basically consists of 4 linked areas defining a timeline of work. The wall panels in each area identify the chronology and general nature of work within each area. The panels and their locations are:

The first paintings & Bushfire Dreamings AREA 1

The Great Map Series AREA 2

The 1980s AREA 3

Love works & Late works AREA 4

AREA 1

The first paintings

After decades as a carver of wooden sculptures for the Central Australian tourist trade, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's paintings from the early 1970s demonstrate a dramatic breakthrough to a new artistic medium. The earliest experiments of the Western Desert 'dot' painting movement can be charted in these paintings.

'Nothing whitefella: no whitefella colour, no whitefella perspective, no whitefella images'. This was his mentor, Geoffrey Bardon's creed to which Clifford Possum's response was to rid elements of European realism like the dancing figure in his very first painting, *Emu Corroboree Man* and take up the visual language of his Anmatyerre culture. In the subsequent heraldic *Honey Ant Ceremony* 1972, precise linework reveals a carver's steadiness of hand, practised in making similar whorled incisions on men's sacred ceremonial boards.

The three dimensional spatial effects evident in works like *Love (Sun) Dreaming* 1972, *Bushfire II* 1972, *Bushfire at Irpulku* 1973 and *Man's Love Story* 1973 also drew on his experience as a carver, including the ability to visualise the final form before commencing work. The cloudy overlays partially masking the marks of ancestral activity, were a refinement of his brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri's favourite device of applying thin washes to veil the underlying designs.

By the end of 1972, Clifford Possum had distinguished himself as one of Papunya Tula's most skilled and innovative painters. The 1976 sequence of small canvas boards from *Aralukaja* to *Five Dreamings* gave rise to a burst of creativity on a scale that dwarfs the jewel-like early works. This intense activity led to the large collaborative painting of unprecedented complexity, *Warlugulong* 1976 and continued in his remarkable series of vast 'map' paintings.

AREA 1

Bushfire Dreamings

Bushfire Dreamings were the subject of a number of Clifford Possum's earliest paintings. *Bushfire I*, *Bushfire II* both dated 1972 and *Bushfire at Iripulku* 1973 depict the effects of fire on the landscape, including the partially destroyed tracks of the old Possum Man Upambura. *Dreaming Story at Warlugulong* 1976 was the artist's first depiction of the fire itself—and first account of the story of Warlugulong and how the ancestral Bushfire began.

Lungkata, the Blue-Tongue Lizard Man, rested at the site of Warlugulong, nearly 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. His two sons speared a sacred kangaroo, cooked it, and then greedily ate it all. The father, wondering why his sons were away so long, suddenly sensed what had happened. Determined to punish them, he blew on his fire-stick until it glowed, then touched it to a bush. The bush exploded into flame, and then burnt everything in its path. Tongues of flame flicked out, as do all lizards' tongues to the present day, and soon the two brothers were fighting the flames. They broke tree branches and beat at the fire, but always the front leapt beyond them, forcing them back. Far to the south, they perished.

Lungkata's Two Sons at Warlugulong 1976, was his first version focusing on the particular sequence relating to the death of the two brothers.

His interest in this episode continued throughout his career. The brothers' life size skeletons, writhing in their death agonies, sprawled across Clifford Possum's last canvases, graphically convey the harsh message of this Dreaming story: that retribution for those who breach its Laws will be swift and merciless.

The enlargement of ancestral tracks into primary compositional elements, seen in *Possum Dreaming at Napperby* 1979, became one of the hallmarks of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's mature style. As the scale of the design motifs increased, the paintings themselves focused on a particular site or Dreaming rather than multiple Dreamings which characterised his earlier Great Map series. This convergence is well illustrated in the massive *Yuelamu, Honey Ant Dreaming* 1980, where he zeroed in on an ant's nest, exploring its underground spaces.

Clifford Possum was one of Western Desert art's most sophisticated colourists. After his move into Alice Springs in the mid 1980s, the artist's freshness of vision found expression in ingenious colour mixes and tonal effects. He was also exploring previously unpainted Dreaming subjects, like the 1986 sequence of Worm Dreaming paintings seen in this exhibition, each dramatically different from the other.

Ever since the radical experiment of *Bushfire I* 1972, Clifford Possum had been refining his dotting technique. By the 1980s, he had arrived at his distinctive rhythmic evenness, combining uncanny precision of placement with an energetic and direct application. He had swapped his brush for the chewed-off end of a stick as his dotting instrument, just as his grandfather had taught him in the bush camp of the initiates.

AREA 2

The Great Map Series

Between October 1976 and July 1979, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri mapped out much of his 'corroboree country' in a series of five monumental canvases. It represents the first body of very large paintings to be produced by a Western Desert artist, and of a narrative complexity unparalleled in the history of Western Desert art. These groundbreaking commissioned works are testament to the artist's rising reputation as a commanding painter, capable of harmoniously combining multiple subjects with ease.

Each painting in this series: *Warlugulong* 1976, *Warlugulong* 1977, *Kerrinyarra* 1977, *Mt Denison Country* 1978 and *Yuutjutiyungu* 1979, depicts the intersecting pathways of numerous ancestral heroes and heroines as they traverse the mulga plains, rocky outcrops, creek beds and occasional sand dunes of western Anmatyerre country.

Seeing the parallels between ceremonial ground mosaics and European style maps, Clifford Possum has combined many of his Dreamings on the one surface in geographical relationship to one another. The vegetation, geology and topography of the area are also represented by the arrangements of background dots.

By painting the Dreaming landscape like a European map non-Aboriginal people are provided with some insight into the 'mind map' that is central to Australian desert culture. These spatial relationships form the basis of route finding and orientation in everyday life.

AREA 3

The 1980s

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AREA 4

The late works

Much of his work from the 1990's is characterised by the recycling of earlier imagery which may initially have been inspired by commissions for paintings based on earlier works reproduced in art books. But it was also because Clifford Possum still loved to paint "more better than everything". He poured his passion for his Dreaming country into countless variations of his iconic earlier depictions of its stories.

Narripi Worm Dreaming of 1986 became the blueprint for his 1990's Worm Dreaming Series, in which he reinvented the 'linked dotting' technique on a larger scale and larger scale. *Man's Love Story (Ngarlu)* 1993 is an example of his late Love Story paintings that shows the artist's enduring fascination with colour. In the baroque splendour of *Man's Love Story 1993-4*, the monumental ambitions of his Great Map series are revisited. Clifford Possum always responded to the challenge of scale. The huge figures of *Two Men Fighting* 1978 provide a link, via the prototypical *Bushfire Dreaming* 1982 and *Untitled (Lungkata's Two Sons)* 1986, to his Warlugulong skeleton series of the 1990's.

In *Dead Spirit at Napperby* and *Two Goanna Men* from 2001, we see the all too brief emergence of a new Clifford Possum, who could bring the conversations of the dead to life with a few masterful strokes of his brush.

AREA 4

Love Dreamings

Love and the search for love are enduring themes of Clifford Possum's work and life. Upambura, the old Possum Man, the artist's namesake and the subject of so many of his paintings, was nicknamed 'Lover Boy' for his endless quest for sexual sustenance. But the Love Dreaming most often associated with the artist and his work is the Love Story for the site of Ngarlu (Red Hill).

As a Tjapaltjarri of his patrilineal descent line, Clifford Possum was keeper/owner of this site, whose principal Dreaming concerns the activities of his ancestor Liltipililti Tjungurrayi.

Liltipililti desired a woman of the Napangati skin group. As his classificatory mother-in-law, she was strictly forbidden as a sexual partner under the marriage laws laid down in the Dreaming. Liltipililti (shown as a large U-shape) spun hair string on a simple cross spindle known as 'wirrakurru' and sang a sacred love

song to draw the Napangati woman to his campsite. As she approached, the Tjungurrayi lost concentration on his spinning and the clumps of unspun hair were blown away.

In many of the artist's depictions of the Ngarlu Love Story, there is a cloudy overlay through which these events are glimpsed. The artist identified this as part of the Dreaming story: the willy willy or small whirlwind which swept through Ngarlu trying to disrupt the unlawful proceedings. In some later versions, Liltipililti's female relatives are depicted keeping a vigil over the lovers' campsite under cover of darkness, accompanied somewhat menacingly by their nulla nullas (fighting sticks).

Background briefing

Within Western Desert society the names of people are determined by the Dreaming. Usual form of address is by 'skin' name. This name will be one of the eight kinship subsection names, which every one will have. Clifford Possum's was 'Tjapaltjari'. This name was decided by the skin names of his parents.

Understanding Western Desert painting.

These painting depict or represent the artist's personal Dreamings and sites.

The artist is identified with particular sites.

This identification depends in part on patrilineal descent (i.e. descended from the father). Other factors include the person's birthplace, where they were initiated, where their parents and grandparents were initiated and other areas with which they or close relatives are associated, usually through extended residency.

Rights and responsibilities to country vary depending on whether the inheritance is from the male or female line.

Clifford Possum's 'Corroboree country' forms a wide arc with a radius of around 100 kilometers northwest of Alice Springs. The sites depicted in Clifford Possum's paintings stretch from Watulpunyu, west of Central Mount Wedge, through Napperby and Mount Allan Stations, northwest as far as Wakulpa close to Yuendumu, and north-east across Mount Dennison and Coniston Stations. For the artist this area was all Anmatyerre country.

A number of local descent groups had custodial rights and responsibilities within this area. They were entitled by tradition to use and occupy Anamtayerre lands. Sections of this area to which different descent groups 'belonged' are often referred to as 'estates'.

The artist's father and grandfather's were keeper-owners for a freshwater soakage called Altjupa halfway down a watercourse called Malliera. This is saltwater country and soakages like Altjupa were critical in ensuring survival in the driest of seasons.

Altjupa is associated with a journey of the Flying Snakes Dreaming. This journey began on the northern rim of the Tanami Desert. As the Snakes travelled across the country, they formed rivers and creek beds as they went by blowing air from their nostrils. Their journey carved out landforms as well as soakages like Altjupa.

Contact history

The Coniston and Napperby Stations were the only cattle stations to the northwest of Alice Springs in the early part of the twentieth century. Their leases encroached onto Anmatyerre lands from the north and the east.

Competition for Aboriginal people in the area with cattle, for water, intensified in the late 1920s because of severe drought. Disputes led to retaliatory killings of Aboriginal people. The drought and the killings led to an exodus of many groups from traditional lands, particularly the Anmatyerre from the northwestern sector of their territory. An increasing number of families attached themselves to pastoral properties to get access to rations and work (stockmen and domestics).

The artist's birthplace was the bed of the Napperby Creek, some fifty kilometers south-east of Altjupa and near the safety of the station house.. His early childhood was spent in the company of his extended family. They lived off the land as their ancestors did before them.

Curriculum Connections

Aboriginal art and the Dreaming

Developing structured learning sessions for students viewing the *Clifford Possum* exhibition.

Viewing this exhibition and undertaking research could take place within the following contexts:

Aims

To develop students' understanding of the links between Aboriginal art and the Dreaming, the environment and everyday life.

To develop students' appreciation and respect for Aboriginal cultural values and beliefs through encounters with and study of Aboriginal visual art

To develop students' understanding, appreciation and respect for Aboriginal art, craft and design from various cultural regions within Australian and from traditional to contemporary situations

To develop students' ability to express and explore their own culture, thoughts, feelings and perceptions through the inspiration of Aboriginal art and culture.

To develop students' ability to apply practical and conceptual skills gained by an understanding of Aboriginal art and culture.

Student learning

Through viewing this exhibition students will:

- Encounter significant and visually powerful works of Aboriginal art
- Learn to identify art from the Western Desert region
- Learn to see differences between art and art styles within this region
- Learn knowledge and techniques for looking at and understanding particular works and reading meanings
- Better understand systems used within Western Desert painting
- Get to know about an outstanding Aboriginal artist and his achievements.
- Encounter powerful, high quality works of art
- Learn about key contemporary contexts and issues related to contemporary Aboriginal art.

Topics

The following topics could be used to explore this exhibition

Diversity of cultural expression

Becoming aware of regional diversity by reading labels and making map connections
Being able to identify differences within the same region

Continuity and change

Being able to recognise changes that have taken place in the art of a particular region

Being able to recognise the change that has taken place in the work of an individual artist

Aboriginality

Recognise and discuss the idea of Aboriginality as expressed in both traditional and contemporary forms.

Be aware of issues and styles of expression associated with contemporary Aboriginal art

Ownership of designs and stories

Understand the concept of ownership by looking at individual works where the story and designs are entrusted to a particular individual.

Art and land

Understand and study works, which are about senses of relationship with the land

Spirituality and belief

Analysing and discussing works which reveal specific beliefs and understandings about the nature of the world

Also; which deal with an individual's or community's responsibilities in relation to spiritual life.

Aboriginal and western systems of art

Learning to 'unpack' or 'read' western art and Aboriginal art works in terms of systems of representation and symbolism.

This will include:

- artistic systems

Drawing and compositional systems, use of colour, modeling and tone, spatial depth, placement of the viewer, use of media and media technology.

- Aboriginal and western cultural frameworks

Systems of recognising and valuing art and artists (this could include the role of galleries, the art and investment market, preservation of art objects and sites, galleries holding exhibitions, publications)

- Aboriginal and western uses of art and role of artists

Recording history and events

Storing and communicating information

Sharing culture

Teaching or educating

Expressing feelings

Confirming beliefs

Celebrating

Experimenting/being creative

Being socially critical

Designing for use

Solving problems

Making beautiful things

5. Notes on key works

`Warlugulong'

1976

168.5 x 170.5 cm

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Painted at Papunya in October 1976 with assistance from Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri

The glowing fireburst of *Warlugulong* 1976 stands at the beginning of Clifford Possum's great map series. Papunya Tula Artists asked Clifford Possum for another Bushfire Dreaming like the one he had painted to such spectacular effect in '*Dreaming Story at Warlugulong*'. In the large scale version, clouds of black smoke and white ash billow out across a vast tract of country, criss-crossed by the paths of dancing women, snakes, birds and animals on their own Dreaming exploits before and after the great Bushfire – and the two brothers fleeing in terror for their lives from its magnetic flames. The canvas is, in effect, a map of a section of Clifford Possum's 'corroboree country' centred approximately 200 kilometres from Alice Springs, and with a radius of about 100 kilometres.

Warlugulong 1976 was painted for the cameras of the BBC documentary 'Desert Dreamers', and there is no doubt that Clifford Possum's inspiration for depicting many Dreamings on the one canvas stems from this remarkable collaborative performance.

'Warlugulong'

1977

201.5 x 338.0 cm

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Painted at Mbunghara Camp NT

The many Dreamings depicted on Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's first very large canvas from Papunya Tula Artists include Dingo, Goanna Men, Rock Wallaby, Emu, Dancing Women, Bushfire Possum, Travelling Family and the attempted theft of Sacred Boards. (See accompanying diagram). This is the second painting in the Great Map series, in which Clifford Possum devoted his energies to large scale mapping of his Dreaming country.

DIAGRAM

'Kerrinyarra'

1977

238.0 x 365.5 cm

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Painted at Mbunghara Camp NT

In this painting, the third in the Great Map series, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri chose to depict the mythologies around Kerrinyarra (Mt Wedge) of which he was Keeper-owner. Twenty-eight key sites at which mythological events occurred in this region are set out in approximate geographical relationship to each other, while travels of numerous

`Tjukurrpa' (Dreamtime) beings are represented as the lines of tracks that join these sites: Travelling Women, Possum, Snake, Tawny Frogmouth, Brown Hawk, Kangaroo and Euro, Water, Centipede, Rock Wallaby, Malliera. As well as representing the country's mythological significance, the artist has described the actual physical makeup of the area, with the use of different coloured background dots. The areas of dots describe the limits of various environments such as: grey dots - salt pans, yellow dots - desert, and pink dots - mulga tree stands.

DIAGRAM

'Mt Denison Country'

1978

200.0 x 170.0cm

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Painted at Mbunghara Camp NT

`Mt Denison Country' depicts twelve ancestral trails as they criss-cross the mulga woodland on what is now Mt Denison Station: Soldier Ants, Emu, Blue Kangaroo, Old Wallaby Man, Old Dingo Man, Wild Carrot, Love Story, Mulga Seed, Echidna and Legless Lizard and Lightning. (see diagram). Sites at which key events in the travels of each of these ancestral heroes occurred are represented on the canvas by concentric circles. They are laid out as an a European map with north to the top of the painting. The presence of the ancestors themselves can be envisaged by their tracks which link the sites.

DIAGRAM

'Yuutjutiyungu'

1979

231.0 x 365.5cm

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Painted in Mbunghara Camp NT

This painting, which Geoffrey Bardon called "the diamond of the movement" is the culmination of the Great Map series. It depicts some of the ancestral trails that pass over a large area of Mt Allan Station (to the north-west of Alice Springs). The painting was said to cover an area of about 40 x 30 miles, on which there are many mulga stands - though there are also small rocky outcrops, low lying swampy areas, open grassy areas and creekbeds with associated scrubby plains. The artist has selected symbolic elements from the ceremonial ground paintings associated with the area depicted and has placed them on the canvas in geographic relationship to each other, to form a mythological `map' of the area. More than twelve sites are identified on the accompanying diagram with many more soakage sites set into the background dotting. The ancestors represented include Kataitja, Lightning, Honey Ant, Woman, Possum, Goanna Brothers, Bush Potato, Sugar Bag, Grass Seed, Caterpillar, Marsupial Mouse and Rock Wallaby.

Yuelamu Honey Ant Dreaming

1980

Papunya, Northern Territory

This painting belongs to a detail of a Honey Ant Dreaming. The place where the Dreaming occurs is called Yuelamu on Mt Allan Station, northwest of Alice Springs.

- Large rains came and washed away the top of the ants' nest chamber, exposing the tunnels. The background lines represent floodwaters and the circles are stones, which have been uncovered by the rain.
- The circles surrounded by curved shapes in the centre of the painting represent the centre of the nest, which contains grubs.
- The circular shapes at the side of the nest are the abdomens (stomachs) of sugar ants that are clinging to the sides of the nest.

The long, curved shapes are the sticks used for digging into the nest.

Man's Love Story

1978

Mbungghara, near Papunya, Northern Territory

synthetic polymer on canvas

- The **main story (mythology)** belonging to this picture is of a man and a woman who came from Yuelamu in the west to Yinalyingi. Here the man found the white sugary substance called 'Lurrka' on leaves at the foot of a mulga tree. Lurrka showed him that there were Tjala or honey ants nearby. This action is shown by the strong shapes on the left of the painting.
- The **second mythology** tells of a Tjungarrayi man who came to the site represented by the pictograms on the right of the painting. He sat down to spin a hairstring on a simple cross-spindle. The spindle is the elliptical (oval) shape connected to the camp fire. The artist has stated that the man sent a telegram-like message to a Napangati woman whom he was attracted to but who was from the wrong kinship subsection for marriage. The woman was drawn to his campsite by the singing.
- The man was so distracted by her approach that he lost concentration on the spinning and his hairstring was blown away by the wind. The concentric circles represent the campsite and the U-shape is the seated man. There are footprints in front of him. The scattered
- The **third mythology** tells of both present and mythical times. During the night four Nungarrayi women came near and sat in darkness around the camps of two men. The camps are represented by the concentric circles. The men and their digging sticks are represented by dotted U-shapes to the left and right. The area of black represents 'Kanala', the area in which post-initiate young men are taught (through ceremonies) this mythology and associated laws. The footprints at the bottom left of the painting are those of the goanna man who, in mythological times, chased a woman whom he eventually caught and decapitated (took off her head). The path of another goanna ancestor is shown in the top right. The coloured background dots symbolise mulga and witchetty seeds, which were collected, ground and used in the preparation of damper. The long bars at the top and bottom of the painting are said to be mirages. The artist has not described the part they play in this mythology. The meaning of the wiggly shapes of an edible green caterpillar is not known

