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BOOK REVIEW

## An Ageless Vision: Ngaanyatjarra Late-Life Art and Country

David Brooks and Darren Jorgensen. 2015  
*Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa*  
Perth: UWA Publishing  
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**Sue Kneebone**

Adelaide Central School of Art

**Corresponding author:** Sue Kneebone, Adelaide Central School of Art, Glenside Cultural Precinct, 7 Mulberry Road, Glenside SA 5065. [sue.kneebone@gmail.com](mailto:sue.kneebone@gmail.com)

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The vibrant and ethereal paintings created by elderly Ngaanyatjarra artists enable them to travel back to Country despite residing in an aged-care facility. This is the focus of *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time*, an insightful interdisciplinary collaboration by art historian David Brooks and anthropologist Darren Jorgensen, whose long association with the Ngaanyatjarra people in the Western Desert is reflected in their familiarity with the artists' life stories and knowledge of Country. Wanarn community, in far Western Australia near the border with the Northern Territory and South Australia, is situated on an old Ngaanyatjarra campground close to the dreaming track of the *Kungkarrangkalpa Tjukurrpa* or Seven Sisters Dreaming. Wanarn's aged-care facility accommodates residents from Docker River, Warburton and Warakurna. Among the various activities provided to residents is a weekly painting program conducted by the nearby Warakurna Arts centre. In this fascinating volume, Brooks and Jorgensen argue that the enigmatic paintings produced by elders in these classes are an expression of 'tjukurrpa-thinking in action'. (52)

Like many books on Aboriginal art, this one is written for the benefit of readers from across the cultural divide. As a result the authors must bridge an ontological chasm when attempting to convey the deeply embedded knowledge of the *tjukurrpa* world that emanates from these gestural paintings produced by artists who are in end-of-life care, a situation that requires

double sensitivity. While it is always better to experience works of art first hand, this book compensates for mediation with the inclusion of full-page colour reproductions seamlessly complementing the account of the artists and their work. The fourteen artists included in the book are Neville Niypula McArthur, Tjunka Lewis, Norman Lyons, Polly Porter, Coiley Campbell, Donald Samson, John Richards, Tjapartji Kanytjuri Bates, Myra Yurtiwa Cook, Carol Maanyatja Golding, Rachel Yukultkja Jennings, Pantjiti Mary McLean, Lisa Porter and Ben Holland.

Brooks and Jorgensen's subtitle, 'Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrpa', reveals their interest in how these ageing Wanarn artists return to Country through painting. The book starts with full-page images of paintings by Neville Niypula McArthur and Tjunka Lewis in which the unusual symmetries of strokes and marks seem to float beyond the formal constraints of the canvas. The authors compare the 'galactic shapes' and visual aesthetics of these Wanarn paintings with the sublime photos taken from the Hubble space telescope, images that also 'resonate deeply with the human soul'. (2) This out-of-world analogy offers a way to appreciate the complex metaphysical experience of Ngaanyatjarra desert dreaming, otherwise known as *tjukurrpa*, which is embedded in these paintings.

The text brings together the artists' life stories and the cultural connections to the *tjukurrpa* inherent in their paintings. Brooks and Jorgensen also offer historical reasons why they believe Ngaanyatjarra art works are compositionally unique within the broader lexicon of stylistic practices in Western Desert art. Whereas Papunya paintings, for example, are populated with powerful iconographic forms representing intercultural communication, they consider the Wanarn artists' paintings more idiosyncratic and varied. They surmise that the relatively eclectic, loose, variable and sparse nature of these emergent paintings indicates that Ngaanyatjarra artists haven't internalised the 'Other' or experienced cultural dissonance to the degree seen in other desert communities where there is less cultural continuity.

They explain that despite the incursions of missions and pastoralism, the Ngaanyatjarra people retained contact with their Country and this is reflected in their social wellbeing as expressed in every life stage, including the stage that white culture now refers to as end-of-life. Many of the Wanarn artists featured in the book were born before or around the time Warburton Mission was established in the early 1930s, when the mission had no government support and so relied on money from the dingo scalp trade. Scalps were brought in by the Ngaanyatjarra people who were paid with food and clothing, while the missionaries then claimed government bounty for the scalps. This system of exchange allowed the Ngaanyatjarra people to maintain close contact with their Country and limit contact with the mission to purposes of trade. The authors note that not all Ngaanyatjarra people lived in or near their Country continuously: many migrated to the eastern goldfields and remained there for years before returning. Brooks and Jorgensen point out that since the 1990s arts programs have effectively alleviated the displacement and social fracturing of Ngaanyatjarra people through the production of paintings that remain in the Ngaanyatjarra world and consciousness. Important precursors to the Wanarn painting program are the Warburton Arts Project from the 1990s and Warakurna Arts, which was established in 2005.

Brooks and Jorgensen explain how *tjukurrpa* knowledge is different for men and women, as is reflected in what they choose to paint. While men's knowledge is embedded within a strict lodge structure and its associated sanctions, women's knowledge affirms the experience of being a woman. For example, *Kungkarrangkalpa* is the *tjukurrpa* painted by Tjapartji Kanytjuri Bates and is an example of the complex interplay of Dreaming story, women's business and deeper life issues. To appreciate how layers of cultural meaning are enacted in these paintings,

we are reminded that a 'Dreaming like the *Kungkarrangkalpa* is not only a story in the landscape, but remains present in it, palpably and active'. (52) Thus the production of Bates's paintings is not a mere representation of ideas, but a way of living and thinking through *tjukurrpa*.

Bates has been painting her Dreaming since the 1990s when she joined the Warburton Arts Project. While her paintings of *Kungkarrangkalpa* are a timeless connection to Country, there is a stylistic shift from her earlier paintings to the works done in her later life at Wanarn. Between the pages of academic interpretation are interleaved four full-page colour reproductions of paintings that exemplify how Bates repetitively employs the *Kungkarrangkalpa* in different forms, symmetries and patterns. It is interesting to observe how Bates's earlier works, which include more traditional motifs and iconographic forms, shift with age to looser marks and geometric abstractions. Tjunka Lewis also shows a move from earlier identifiable iconographic forms to more abstract processes in later life. While there is no observable correlation between form and content, the gestural forms continue to refer to the artists *tjukurrpa*. It is this departure from the representational into more indefinable forms that Brooks and Jorgensen foreground when discussing these Ngaanyatjarra elders' works.

In the latter half of the book, the focus shifts to a speculative comparison of these 'wobbly' paintings by the ageing Wanarn artists to the works of popular figures from the canon of European art history, music and philosophy. This initially seems like an incongruous position from which to scrutinise the Wanarn painters, but ultimately it yields value. Brooks and Jorgensen invoke Turner, Cezanne and Beethoven, all of whose artistic careers registered transformative shifts in later life due to the effects of old age. Further comparisons to modernist art in which the emphasis on representation slips away in favour of abstract forms and colour also point toward experiences that accompany ageing. In the discussion of Myra Yurtiwa Cook's life and her *Lirrun Tjukurrpa* paintings, the authors point out that after eye surgery her use of colour becomes more impetuous and visceral. That is, even though Cook's sight is improved, her aesthetic sensibility becomes less about representing the visually apprehended natural world than 'bringing a sensation of nature into being'. (84) Other examples of a visual sensibility increasingly cut loose from the constraints of representation are Ben Holland's angular and fragmented *Ngirntaka* paintings which are said to reveal a way of being on a physical and metaphysical plane as shown in an 'interchangeability of forms between animals, plants and other natural forms with Dreaming beings'. (94–6) These examples demonstrate not only how desert art reveals a mutable ontology but also that the visual forms which the Western tradition considers avant-garde are here associated with age and a near-death apprehension of the world.

In their conclusion, Brooks and Jorgensen propose that these aged-care painters have little concern with the 'fate of their expression'. Rather, 'the act of painting the *tjukurrpa* supersedes the fate of its representation either in the art world or in desert society itself'. (108) Thus the agency of *tjukurrpa* thinking is expressed through the gestural marks that make the paintings. It is a complex quest to seek to unravel these enigmatic artworks through the discourse of Western art, which has difficulty in grasping metaphysical concepts that don't lend themselves to iconography. For me as a visual artist, the book's discursive analyses also raise philosophical questions about the material and embodied process of creating art in the world, especially the world of an aged-care facility. Colour is believed to be the most important human visual stimulus and it has also been found to play a significant role in enhancing memory performance. In light of the general acceptance that colour vision and memory can deteriorate with age, I was curious to know more about the aesthetic decisions facilitated by the arts workers involved in these programs. Does the Wanarn artists' use of vibrant colours on a black

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background, for instance, provide a strong contrast or visual stimulus for ageing eyes and minds? To ask questions of this kind is not for a minute to doubt that this painting practice has provided a means for many frail and immobile Ngaanyatjarra people to continue to think and express their *tjukurrpa*, but it is to try and grasp an understanding of the processes and methods that augment experience through the materiality of paint.

*Wanarn Painters of Place and Time* is a celebration of the knowledge implicit in these paintings by elderly Ngaanyatjarra artists, many of which seem to transcend material embodiment. The final image presented in the book presents an array of wobbly pink crosses that appear to be floating across the black canvas as though they have arrived impromptu to visit for a moment before disappearing again. These ethereal marks could be read as stars or some other sign but it is more important to understand that this *Untitled* painting by an *Unknown* artist isn't produced for us but is the ritual practice of *tjukurrpa*-thinking. Akin to the ephemeral marks traced in the sand that are the origins of desert knowledge, these images capture both transience and the timeless knowledge of *tjukurrpa*.

Despite frailty and fading eyesight, the vision of Wanarn painters remains strong. Ageing never looked so good.

## About the author

Sue Kneebone is a visual artist whose work engages the spectres of colonial settler society. She has a PhD from the South Australian School of Art and is a lecturer at the Adelaide Central School of Art. Sue Kneebone is a visual artist whose work engages the spectres of colonial settler society. She has a PhD from the South Australian School of Art and is a lecturer at the Adelaide Central School of Art. [suekneebone.com](http://suekneebone.com)