



Tommy Mitchell 2009. Photo by Edwina Circuitt © Warakurna Artists. Artworks © Tommy Mitchell

WARAKURNA ARTISTS, WA

It has been nearly 20 years since the remote community of Warakurna in Ngaanyatjarra Lands first came to prominence with Midnight Oil's lament of the same name.¹ On 29 June 2005, the Federal Court recognised that Ngaanyatjarra native title claimants held exclusive possession rights over most of their country, covering almost 188,000 square kilometres in the central desert region of WA, stretching from the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve to the South Australian border. Since this statement of empowerment we have witnessed an intense and dynamic artistic flourish from many art centres across these lands, and it is truly wonderful that Warakurna, which commenced operations in 2005 and is amongst the newest of these centres, now conjures an entirely different spectrum of images in our cultural record.

Warakurna is situated near the Rawlinson Ranges in Western Australia, approximately 330km from Uluru, near the Northern Territory border. The township of around 180 people nurtures an art centre that is fully owned and governed by Aboriginal people and represents artists from the nearby community of Wanarn, as well as its resident painters. A self-professed energetic, happy and creative place², the art centre is a spacious, brightly decorated corrugated iron building with a painting area, office and storage room.

Warakurna's premier artists include Tommy Mitchell, Myra Cook, Tjapartji Bates, Carol Maayatja Golding, Peter Tjarluri Lewis, Tjunka Lewis and Rachel Yukultja Jennings. Most began painting in 2005 with a few exceptions: Tjunka Lewis previously painted for Papulankutja/Blackstone; and senior artist Tjapartji Bates first painted for the Warburton Arts Project in the 1990s.



© Myra Cook, *Lirrun*, 2009.
Photo courtesy of Edwina Circuiti © Warakurna Artists

Tjapartji Bates won the Normandy Heritage Art Prize in the 4th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards of 1998, and was included in the seminal 'Colour Power' exhibition from the National Gallery of Victoria in 2004. Peter Tjarluri Lewis featured in the Australian Pavilion's 2005 World Expo exhibition, 'Painting Country - a West to East Journey', Aichi, Japan.

More recently, Warakurna artists featured in the 2007 exhibition 'Kutju - One, Western Desert Mob Ngaanyatjarra Lands Regional Exhibition', at Lawrence Wilson Gallery, Perth; and the 2008/2009 Melbourne Museum exhibition 'Yamatji Pirmi: Many Friendships, Sharing Life and Art from the Western Desert'.



© Carol Maayatja Golding, *Tjukurla Pirmi*, 2009.
Photo courtesy of Edwina Circuiti © Warakurna Artists

Warakurna artists are represented in the collections of Artbank, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, and the Art Gallery of NSW. The centre is supported by the Western Desert Mob alliance, and works are exhibited through select galleries: Randell Lane Gallery Perth; Alcaston Gallery Melbourne; Marshall Arts Adelaide; Aboriginal & Pacific Art & Birrung World Vision Gallery Sydney; Short Street Gallery Broome; and Outstation Gallery Darwin.

Since its inception Warakurna Artists has exhibited at the yearly Alice Springs Desert Mob art fair, which showcases works by Aboriginal run centres from Central Australia. In a review of the 2005 fair the centre was identified as one to watch³; this year they showed ten works by eight artists, selling 80% on opening night. Warakurna Artist's manager Edwina Circuiti is naturally pleased and has commented that sales have increased yearly, with a marked improvement in 2009.

This year also saw the selection of two Warakurna works for the 26th Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award: a vibrant, energetic canvas by Tommy Mitchell, and a richly detailed first encounter depiction of the Lasseter's gold exploration story by the Warakurna Artist's Women's Collaborative; an example of a first contact story becoming modern *Tjukurrpa* or dreaming. Mitchell last featured in the 2006 awards, and Carol Maayatja Golding was a finalist in 2007.



Good governance and community support are vital issues for art centres, and a critical message underpinning the campaign for ethical dealing supported by Desart. In 2008 Warakurna Artists won the highly contested *Reconciliation Australia and BHP Billiton Indigenous Governance Award*.

© Ernest Bennet, Bronze *Miru*, 2008. Cast by Blueprint Sculpture.
Photo by Alexander Lynne / © Warakurna Artists

The prize endowed the centre with \$50,000 scholarship for two coordinators to attend an international leadership program in the US; as well as a \$10,000 prize towards governance training and professional development for indigenous artists at the centre.

Continuing to enact its mission, Warakurna Artists has recently undertaken bold initiatives to rekindle and nurture traditional skills and engage and empower male artists, which has also forged a new direction in the centre's art making program.

The centre instigated 'Wati Wednesdays', a men's only painting day to encourage participation of the younger men or *wati*; and in celebration of its fifth year, Warakurna Artists is facilitating a weaponry craft project that will culminate in the production of a body of new work: the first output being a limited edition of 6 bronze *miru* or spearthrowers by Ernest Bennett. Aside from their potency and appeal as sculpture, these works are also powerful illustrations of Warakurna's commitment to Ngaanyatjarra culture.

JANE RAFFAN

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¹ *Diesel to Dust*, Columbia Records, 1990

² <http://thrivinginthedesert.blogspot.com/search/label/About%20Warakurna%20Artists%20Aboriginal%20Corporation>

³ Nicholas Rothwell, 'Lines Shimmer into shape', *The Australian*, 13 September 2005, p14