

Lightning Strike at Rosewood 1991

This work was painted in 1991 for Mary Macha in the last year the artist worked with her. According to Macha's typewritten catalogue card, *Lightning Strike at Rosewood* refers to Rover Thomas's life as a stockman in the late 1940s,

“This happened about 1947 when Rover was working in this country ... Blackfella said, “I can't make it”. He had a sick wife (the figure lying down). He took shelter in a cave with his wife and a young girl. Lightning struck and the young girl was killed.”

Something memorable happened on Rosewood Station that Thomas either witnessed or was told about it. Rosewood covering one million acres, was leased by the Kilfoyles and regarded then, as a model station. It was situated close to Lake Argyle just over the border with the Northern Territory, at the eastern edge of the extensive Durack Kimberley empire.

Rover Thomas worked on Rosewood and the adjoining stations, Lisadell, Argyle and Old Waterloo that mustered cattle together. On Rosewood, Thomas worked for Jack Kilfoyle with the Gija stockmen Paddy Jamanji and Beerbee Mungari. Later they all moved to Texas Downs, where Jimmy Klein the former Rosewood manager was now the boss. His wife was Hector Jandany's sister, and Jimmy Klein was well regarded by the Texas mob.

When Gija artist, Hector Jandany related violent frontier stories, he used the English word 'lightning' to mean gunshot. Perhaps that word association and the depiction of the three figures in the painting is behind the persistent conjecture that *Lightning Strike at Rosewood* refers to a massacre. Rover Thomas made a series of massacre paintings often in the form of explicit crime scene maps, and usually devoid of human figures, except for stylized skulls. *Lightning Strike at Rosewood* is not one of his massacre paintings.

Rover Thomas was acutely attuned to the dangers of severe Wet season electrical storms, and he had earlier painted another much more serious and tragic incident for Mary Macha, about a furious storm on Texas Downs when lightning struck a cave where families were sheltering and caused a landslide which killed many people. They are represented in *Texas Downs Country* 1984 as a cluster of skulls and in *Mirriya (Mureeya) Texas Downs Country*, AGWA, 1989 as a line of skulls. This same site is depicted in *All That Big Rain Coming Down Top Side*, also painted in 1991.

Lightning Strike at Rosewood shows the Duncan Highway, then little more than a well- formed bush track, which runs through Rosewood from North to South parallel to the NT border, dividing the upper and lower segments of the painting. Above are the sandstone cliffs rising up in profile, and below the range on the other side of the road, where the three limestone caves are depicted from a planar perspective. The point of view is that of a travelling pastoral worker, the stockman on his horse, moving from right to left towards the cave, where three figures - the man and two women - are shown in the interior. We see them at the decisive moment, when the lightning flashes, simultaneously bleaching out and illuminating them.

The figures are depicted non-naturalistically, within the style and conventions of the rock art of the Keep River region. Darrell Lewis remarked that, “the walls of almost all shelters are decorated with rock art”. Both Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji painted paintings of rock art. Rover Thomas may have heard the story when he was riding through Rosewood country, and been shown the cave where it happened and saw the rock art, or perhaps it was literally an electrifying experience: Thomas took shelter in a cave during a storm, lightning flashed, the paintings were revealed and he was told the story.

In *Lightning Strike at Rosewood*, Rover Thomas has recalled and dramatised the moment it happened and made a *retablo*, to memorialize the death of the young girl.

Dr Suzanne Spinner

References:

‘Mary Macha Archives’, digitised in 2017, deposited J S Battye Library of WA History, State Library of WA.

‘An analysis of the social profile of the Kilfoyles of Rosewood Station’, Geraldine Byrne. MA thesis, Edith Cowan University, 1995.

‘They meet up at Bilinara: Rock Art in the Victoria River Valley’, Darrell Lewis. MA thesis, Australian National University, 1990.

‘Impact Stories of the East Kimberley’, East Kimberley Working Paper No 28. Helen Ross (Editor), Eileen Bray (Translator) and Cathie Clement (Archivist), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies & Anthropology Department, University of Western Australia, 1989.

‘Patrols in Timber Creek Wave Hill Districts (Newry Station to Rosewood via Argyle)’, Patrol Officer, G. Sweeney, Report, Commonwealth Archives, 1947.

‘Changing Ecological Concerns in Rock Art subject matter of North Australia’s Keep River Region’, Paul Tacon, Richard Fullager, Ken Mulvaney, Lesley Head, Sven Ouzman and Paddy Bedford. University of Wollongong, Research Online, 2003.