

INDIGENOUS ARCHIVES

*THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF
ABORIGINAL ART*

EDITED BY DARREN
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THREE CERTIFICATES ARE NOT ENOUGH: ROVER THOMAS AND ART CENTRE ARCHIVES

Suzanne Spinner

Primary research at art centres on provenance can appear quite straightforward. Aboriginal artists in remote areas generally work under the auspices of a local community-owned art centre, and for Rover Thomas that was Waringarri Aboriginal Arts in Kununurra. Rover Thomas began painting in 1983, and soon after, in 1985, Waringarri Arts was founded. Thomas painted for the Waringarri Art Centre from 1986 until 1996, so the art centre records capture his most productive decade. Warmun Art Centre was founded in 1998 in Warmun (or Turkey Creek), the community where Rover Thomas lived; however Thomas died in 1998 and never painted for Warmun Art Centre. He did paint for other agents and individuals who kept records of varying degrees of reliability.

The Waringarri records provide a solid database for researchers. What exactly are these records? They comprise three distinct sets of records and a number of subsets. The first set, the primary records, are two green-coloured Collins nine-column money books headed Waringarri Arts and Crafts Artists Supplies and Stock Book. All the entries are handwritten and stretch over a double opened page as they try to capture the purchase by the art centre of paintings by artists such as Thomas. These records detail how much was paid for it, when it was made, whether it was on canvas board or a canvas, when it was sold and for how much. They also show which canvases, boards, brushes, binders and

ochres were supplied at a price noted, to which artist and when. This system assigned a stock number to the support (the canvas or board) and a separate catalogue number to the finished work when it was purchased back by the art centre. At a certain point a new art centre manager decided to simplify things and assign one catalogue number to each work and to begin the numbering system all over again, and then at a later date another manager went back to year zero and started the catalogue numbering again. The stock books are a unique record which yield rich material for research. As well as very specific details about materials, they show who Rover Thomas was painting with at each stage of his career. This can be deduced from records of a buying trip as the art coordinator documents his visit to Warmun/Turkey Creek or Frog Hollow (a nearby community), where, for example, he picked up three Rover Thomas works, two Queenie McKenzies and two Jack Brittens. Financial records of payments to artists and to galleries and daily takings books, cheque accounts, invoices and receipts, as well as correspondence with dealers and galleries, are all there in the archives to forensically track the life of a work.

A certificate of authenticity is generated for each work sold by Waringarri Aboriginal Arts. In its perfect form it has the artist's name, their skin name, bush name, domicile, language, the date the work was painted, the dimensions, the medium and the support, a title for the work and the story explaining the Indigenous significance of the subject matter, the location, dreaming or historical event it depicts. These certificates also contain a schematic representation of the painting with labelled sites or objects marked and a photograph of the work, which could be a Polaroid or an SLR photograph in colour, and a catalogue number. While these records are sometimes comprehensive, they can be as scant as a Polaroid with a catalogue number. These

certificates were filed in plastic pockets in large spring folders under the name of the individual artist. So there was a 'Rover Book' and a 'Queenie Book', until 1997, when the manager Kevin Kelly left Waringarri and set up his own art business, Red Rock Art. His successors decided to break up these artists' books and file material in general artists' files in filing cabinets by year, under different headings. In 2002, after five years and more than five different managers, Cathy Cummins was appointed to Waringarri Aboriginal Arts and remains in the position today. Attempts have since been made to reconstitute the individual artists' books, at least for the famous names like Rover Thomas. While I was at Waringarri in 2008, I found various photographs of paintings. Some of them had dimensions written in pen on the back and others had catalogue numbers; some of them went with the certificates in the plastic pockets and some needed a new plastic pocket of their own because they were the only extant evidence of that painting. Cathy Cummins has developed a computer database of artist records, which again, in perfect form, contains: the catalogue number, the medium, the dimensions, the title or location depicted and the story. It also shows that the work was sold and has two blank fields relating to its purchase. There are significant discrepancies between the paper and digital records and there are certificates missing.

Getting the Story – Frances Kofod

Linguist Frances Kofod began her work on East Kimberley languages in 1971. She helped the Indigenous Mirima Council in Kununurra set up the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Cultural Centre, which produced wordbooks, grammars and dictionaries in Miriwoong, Gajirrawong and Gija for the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. Between 1989 and 2008,

Kofod worked with all of the community controlled art centres in the region – Waringarri Aboriginal Arts in Kununurra, Warmun Art Centre at Turkey Creek and Jirrawun Arts at Kununurra and Wyndham – taking down stories of the paintings from the artists in language. The stories of the paintings constitute an invaluable record. As Kofod comments:

Some stories often talk about the physical reality of the paint and how it represents the country. They may include dreaming stories, stories that recount the relatively recent history of the invasion by Europeans, and the artists' personal travels in the country as stockmen and women working for the pastoralists.¹

In 1991, in her role as a language worker contracted by Waringarri Art Centre, Kofod interviewed, transcribed and created the most authoritative oral history of the life of Rover Thomas – effectively the only one. Kofod's records of the stories and sites associated with Rover Thomas paintings formed the basis of an important document generated by Waringarri Aboriginal Arts titled, 'Waringarri Arts: Artist Reference, Artist: Rover Thomas (Roba)'. It was compiled in late 1995 or early 1996 and runs to sixteen pages, is undated, unpaginated and no author is given. For the purpose of citation, I numbered the sixteen pages and called it *Roba: Themes and Stories*. It is a detailed list and contains a description of the themes and topics painted by Rover Thomas with Waringarri Arts, and it is referenced to Waringarri catalogue numbers of paintings, which depict the theme or subject noted. The manager, Kevin Kelly auspiced its production with assistance from Eric Kjellgren, who was then a PhD student and was also helping take down artists' stories for paintings.

Roba: Themes and Stories is arranged in many categories: Country, Dreamings (including, the Goorirr-Goorirr or Krill Krill), Natural events (Sun, Sunrise, Milky Way, Night Sky, Flood), Historical events (including Cyclone Tracy) and man-made features: bridges, crossroads, roads and telephone boxes. 'Country' is the largest category and takes up almost seven pages of the document, followed by 'Dreamings', which covers six pages. The detail within each category is extensive; for instance, under 'Country: Canning Stock Route', ten particular places or sites are described, and under 'Country: Texas Downs', another ten places and sites are described. It is an invaluable resource for understanding what the artist painted freely as opposed to the themes, stories and sites he might have painted under commission from other agents. *Roba: Themes and Stories* also provides a baseline comparison for works attributed to the artist. For example, in 1995 Rover Thomas was brought to Melbourne by Kimberley Art and participated in a Painting Camp in the Dandenongs run by Neil McLeod. Amongst a very large cluster of paintings purportedly produced at this time are eleven Owl paintings, and eight paintings of Willy Willy and Lightning have subsequently appeared; however the *Roba* document lists only one painting each for Owls and Willy Willy (Miowon) and none at all for Lightning. Dealer Adrian Newstead has been closely associated with Neil McLeod, and Newstead's book *The Dealer is the Devil: An Insider's History of Aboriginal Art* (2014) is an extended defence of McLeod cast within a voluminous history of Aboriginal art.²

The Waringarri Records – Ceci n'est pas un cyclone

As an example of just how useful art centre records are, consider the painting *Ngarin Janu Country*, 1988, featured in the *Yiribana* catalogue of 1994.³ *Yiribana* is the name for the Indigenous art

gallery inside the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and this publication surveys its works. The catalogue is by Margo Neale and edited by Vivien Johnson. *Ngarin Janu Country* is from Waringarri Arts and was purchased by the AGNSW from Aboriginal Arts Australia after it was shown in the 1988 exhibition *Aboriginal Art of the East Kimberley* at Hogarth Galleries, curated by Ace Bourke. The story on the Waringarri Art Centre certificate states:

Ngarin Janu Country is near the Canning Stock Route. This painting is about the Dreamtime story when the big lake (Ngarin Janu) got flooded. The people who lived there tried to escape the flood, but were drowned when they tried to cross the channel from the sandbar to the big hill (Miwuda). (Waringarri Arts Painting Certificate AP 1691)

The accompanying diagram on the certificate shows the distinctive funnel shape set on the diagonal, a striking feature of the composition, which represents the lake water (Ngarin Janu), and a smaller funnel shape running parallel to the lake on one bank which represents the sandbar where the people tried to cross.

In *Roba Themes and Stories*, even more details are noted about this site and subject:

Ngarinjanoo Country: Ngararinjanoo is a lake and swamp with reeds near the CSR between Well 33 and Kintore. This is the artist's father's country. The proper law for this place is called Ngoolooloolbarr. It is associated with mens song and flood dreamings.⁴

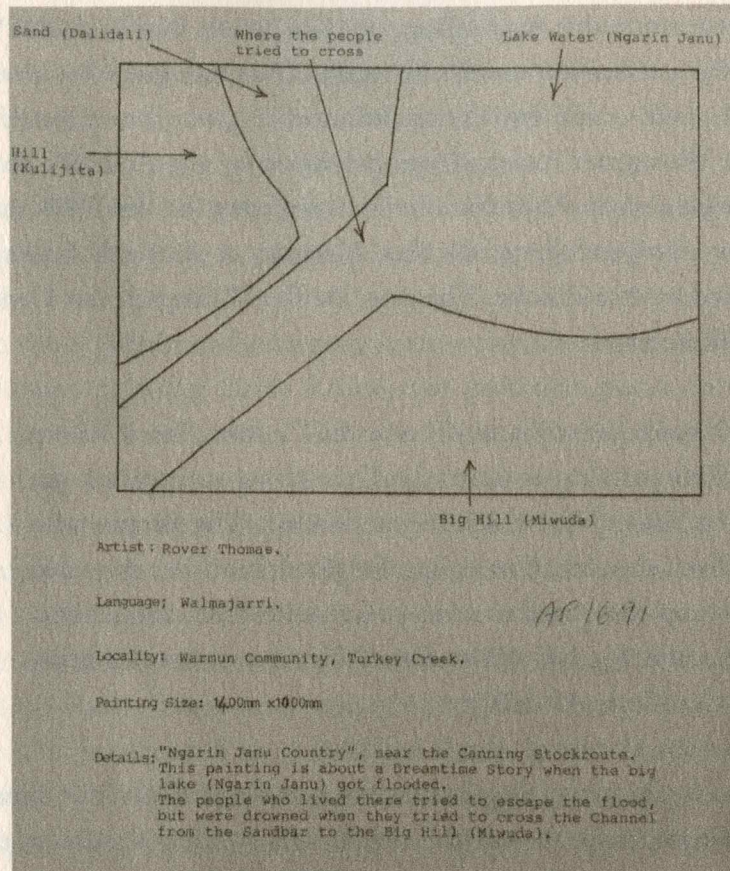


Figure 4.1: Waringarri certificate of Ngarin Janu Country

There can be no doubt what this painting depicts and why it is an important story for Rover Thomas.

Now consider Lot 39 offered by the auction house Lawson-Menzies in November 2007. This painting is called by a similar but significantly different title, *Ngarin Janu Place (Cyclone Tracy)*, 1995, natural earth pigments on linen, 101 cm x 183 cm, Provenance: 'Neil McLeod Fine Art, Private Collection, Vic, sold with original gallery documentation'. Estimate: \$60,000–80,000. The image is a simplified single funnel shape running diagonally across the picture plane demarcated by fine white dots. What story has been

provided (presumably by Neil McLeod) to the auction house, Lawson-Menzies, to connect Ngarin Janu with Cyclone Tracy? After a preamble about the Krill Krill Dreaming and Cyclone Tracy hitting Darwin and finally petering out at Port Hedland, the purported subject is mentioned:

In this painting, Cyclone Tracy toward the end of its journey, is transmogrified into one of the Rainbow Snakes – Wungurr, Ungudd or Juntarkal. These Rainbow Snakes imbue the Kimberley landscape with eternal life force.⁵

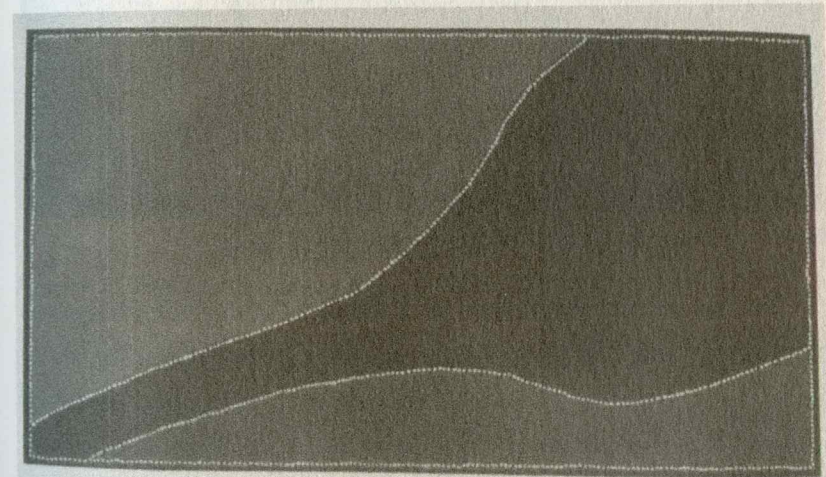


Figure 4.2: Lawson-Menzies catalogue Ngarin Janu Place (Cyclone Tracy)

Who would be convinced by this story? Only somebody who did not know the actual Ngarin Janu story, and whose mind and eyes had been prepared by the *Yiribana* catalogue entry by Margo Neale on *Ngarin Janu*. It is printed as part of a double-page spread with a full-page colour reproduction of the AGNSW-owned painting on the right, and the exegesis on the left, accompanied by a small colour image of another painting by Rover Thomas,

entitled *Cyclone* (1994), with no dimensions, material, support, source or provenance cited. There is no indication where *Cyclone* (1994) came from, no proper credit either on the page itself or in the back of the publication listing picture sources.

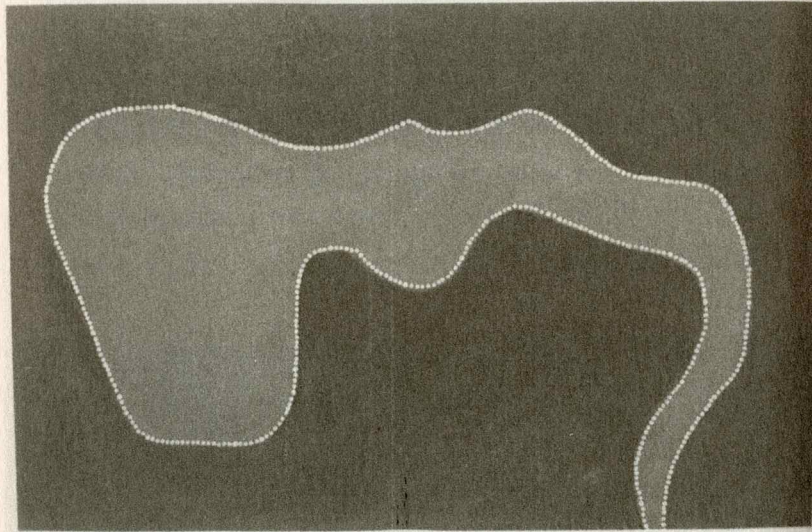


Figure 4.3: Detail of Yiribana catalogue *Cyclone*, 1994

In the acknowledgments to *Yiribana* Christopher Hodges is mentioned, and it is most likely that this second painting came from Hodges' gallery, Utopia Art Sydney.⁶ This is because their first exhibition of Rover Thomas work, *New Paintings: A Solo Exhibition*, was held in 1994, and the painting illustrated clearly relates to another work: *Cyclone* (1996), ochre and synthetic polymer on linen, 78 cm x 57 cm, exhibited by Hodges in the Utopia Art Sydney/Sherman Gallery exhibition 'Rover Thomas Survey Exhibition' in 1997 and illustrated in the catalogue.

I have not been able to locate a checklist of the works from the 1994 exhibition but I do have the checklist for the 1997 exhibition. I do not have confidence in the dates given for these two similar cyclone works, 1994 and 1996, because I found so

many inconsistencies around the dates of the recent work in this 1997 exhibition. Dates given on captions in the 1997 catalogue did not agree with the dates given for the same work in the checklist.

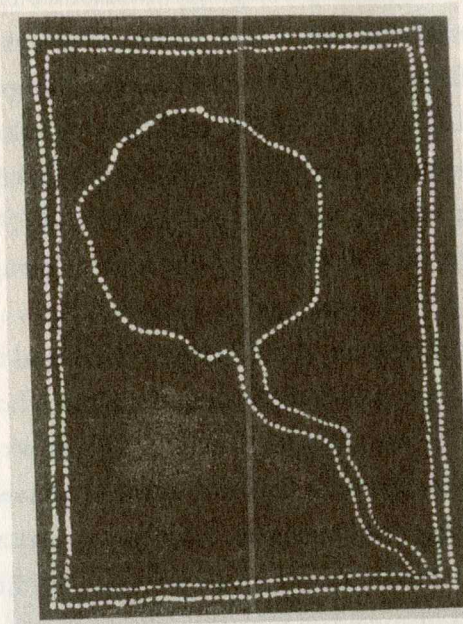


Figure 4.4: Utopia Art Sydney catalogue, *Cyclone* (1996)

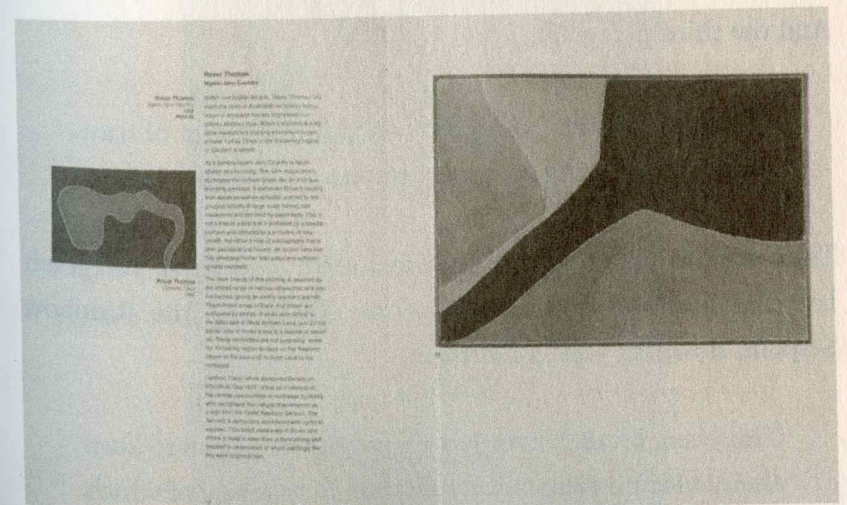


Figure 4.5: Yiribana catalogue double page

The *Yiribana* catalogue follows a very consistent format: an AGNSW painting on the right-hand side of the page accompanied by a page of text on the left-hand side and a small supporting colour reproduction of a photograph or another related artwork, establishing for the reader a connection between the AGNSW painting and the accompanying small image. Margo Neale's essay on *Ngarin Janu Country* does not reflect any of the detailed story information documented by Waringarri Aboriginal Arts in relation to this painting. Neale's opening paragraph locates Rover Thomas in the East Kimberley School, and the second paragraph tells us:

As a painting, *Ngarin Janu Country* is harsh and haunting. The dark shape, which dominates the surface hovers like an ominous brooding presence. It delineates Rover's country from above as well as vertically, scarred by the gouging actions of large-scale mining and massacres and denuded by pastoralists. This is not a map of a land that is animated by ancestral journeys

And the third paragraph, refers to:

The stark beauty...assisted by the limited range of natural ochres...giving an earthy resonant warmth.

Then for no apparent reason the fourth and final paragraph launches into a discussion of Cyclone Tracy and the Rainbow Serpent, finishing with a flourish:

This event awakened in Rover and others a need to keep their culture strong and resulted in ceremonies of which paintings like this were originally part.⁷

So now, *Ngarin Janu Country* has nothing to do with the Canning Stock Route, Rover Thomas's father, a terrible flood where many people died, flood Dreamings and proper Men's Law, but it might just have something to do with Cyclone Tracy and is otherwise harsh and haunting and depicts a landscape despoiled by miners and pastoralists. How could this happen? My inference is that the small Cyclone Tracy painting suggested this new and unusual interpretation of *Ngarin Janu Country*. *Ngarin Janu Place (Cyclone Tracy)* (1995) has not sold and can be seen on the Burrinja Gallery website. The text and story associated with the painting (*Ngarin Janu*) cannot be verified from information located in the Waringarri Aboriginal Arts archives.

Another Willy Willy Formed Over Japan

Rover Thomas produced an untitled painting, known as *Baragoo country*, where the dog Killed the emu, for Waringarri Arts in 1990

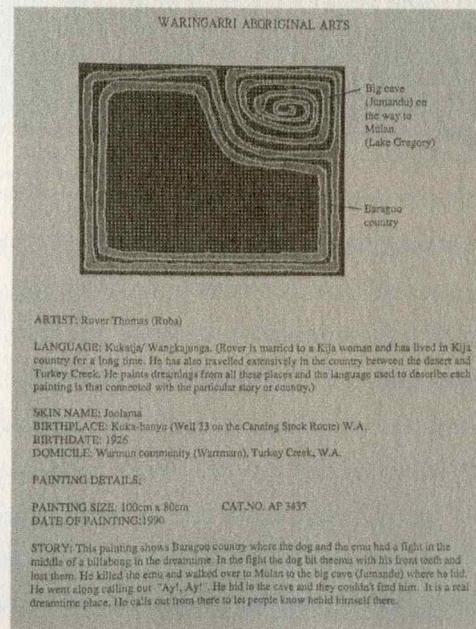
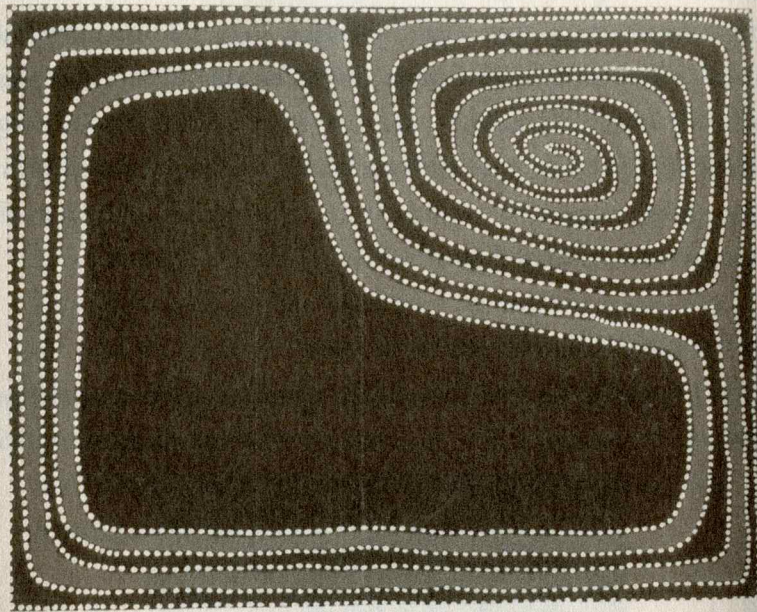


Figure 4.6: Waringarri certificate, Baragoo country, where the dog Killed the emu

(Waringarri Arts Archives, 1990, AP 3437). This painting was exhibited in *Turkey Creek Artists* at Dreamtime Gallery Perth in 1990. Works from this exhibition were included in an exhibition that went to Japan, *Western Australian Painting and Ceramics*, Gallery Sanyo, Ginza Chuo-Ku, Tokyo, 5–27 July, 1991.



20

20 Rover Thomas (Joolama)
(circa 1926-1998)
WILLY WILLY 1989
Natural earth pigments and natural
binder on canvas
Bears artist's name, size and
Waringarri Arts catalogue numbers
AP-3437 and S-3051 on the
reverse
80 by 120cm
Provenance:
Painted at Warmun (Turkey Creek)
for Waringarri Arts, Kununurra in
1989
Private Collection, Melbourne
Exhibited:
Western Australian Painting
Gallery Sanyo, Tokyo, July 1991
\$35,000 - 50,000
US\$21,300 - 30,500
€22,700 - 32,500

Figure 4.7: Sotheby's catalogue entry Willy Willy

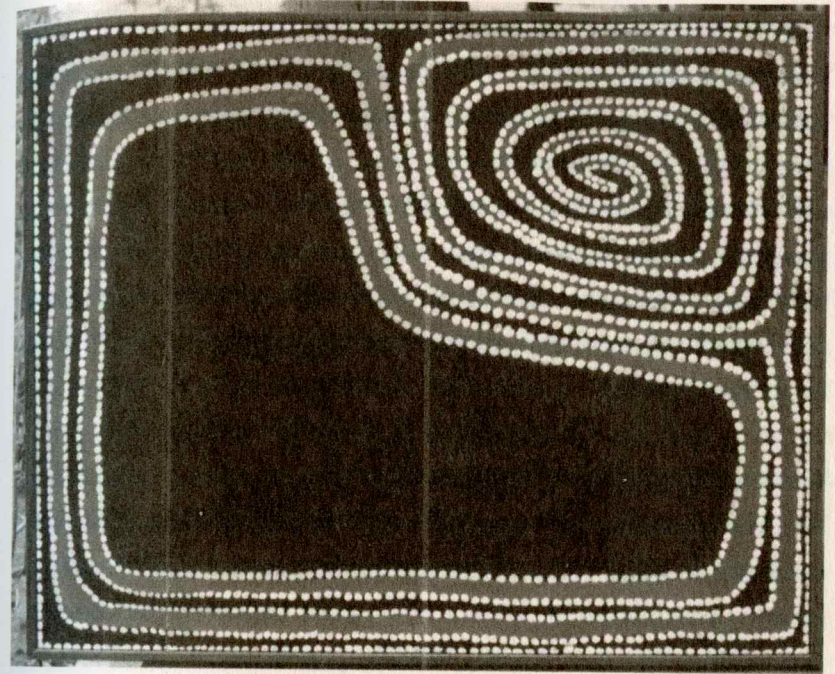


Figure 4.8: Waringarri photograph of AP 3437

In 2000, Sotheby's offered a Rover Thomas painting *Willy Willy* (Thomas, R. 1989), which cited its provenance as Waringarri Arts AP 3437 and looks remarkably like *Baragoo country*, where the dog *Killed the emu*, and one may wonder why the title has changed; however close examination of the photographs, particularly of the eye of the spiral form, shows it is not the same painting.⁸ The provenance notes the Japanese exhibition and its current location in a 'private collection, Melbourne'. So there are two different works with the same Waringarri catalogue number and exhibition history. The second work has a more saleable title and a connection by implication to the National Gallery of Victoria work *Dreamtime Story of the Willy Willy* (1989), but it is a spurious title and the connection misleading as the painting story on the original Waringarri certificate makes clear—the spiral form in the top

represents a big cave on the way to Mulan and Lake Gregory, and does not represent a willy willy. At this point the painting remains a mystery and highlights how schematic representations on certificates can be ambiguous and deceptive. If you had only consulted the schematic drawing on the Waringarri certificate against the image in the auction catalogue, you could easily have thought the works were the same, albeit with a new title. Comparing the two photographs showed that something else was happening, which in turn drew attention back to the new title.

Warmun Art Centres: Many and Various

The Warmun Art Centre opened in 1998, the year Rover Thomas died, and he never painted for them, so why should it be considered in any examination of his *oeuvre*? It must be considered because before Warmun Art Centre (WAC) opened, there were two earlier versions, which are frequently glossed as 'Warmun Art Centre' in auction catalogues, and work attributed to Rover Thomas was sourced from them. The first manifestation, which operated in Warmun in 1994, was called Warmun Aboriginal Corporation or Warmun Community Arts, Warmun Community (Turkey Creek) Incorporated. It issued its own certificates and operated under the benign aegis of the Warmun Council. It was organised by Peter Harrison of Kimberley Art gallery in Melbourne and run on the ground by Dave Rock, a community policeman and later an employee of the Warmun Community Council.⁹ There is no indication in the Waringarri records that there was any formal or acknowledged relationship with Waringarri Arts. In fact Kimberley Art, which had previously bought from Waringarri Arts, continued to buy from them occasionally.

Kimberley Art sent pre-primed and stretched canvases to Dave Rock who distributed them to the most saleable senior

artists: Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, Jack Britten, Hector Jandany, George Mung Mung and Henry Wanambi. Completed work was returned to Dave Rock and then sent on to Kimberley Art in Melbourne.

In 1995, anthropologist Patricia Vinnicombe directed a project with Queenie McKenzie and Warmun women making paintings and recording stories about the community and local sites. Vinnicombe was given permission to photocopy the records of Queenie McKenzie's work, kept by both Waringarri Arts in Kununurra and the 'Warmun Community Co-ordinator' of the paintings sold through the auspices of the community – some fifty-two works during the nine month period from September 1994 to May 1995.¹⁰ Vinnicombe presumably is referring to Warmun Community Arts and Dave Rock, though she does not name them. She does, however, mention connections to a gallery in Melbourne and Paris. Kimberley Art was based in Flinders Lane, Melbourne, and had exhibitions with Galerie Baudoin Lebon in Paris. Vinnicombe remarks: 'The standard of documentation that accompanies the paintings (by Queenie McKenzie) varies from excellent to abysmal, with that from Waringarri Arts being the most comprehensive'.¹¹

In November 1995 Dave Rock was leaving Warmun and he facilitated the entry into the community of Maxine Taylor and her partner 'Serge' Terrence Brooks, who had previously run the takeaway fish and chip shop in Wyndham. Warmun Community Council recruited Taylor and Brooks to run the Warmun roadhouse on the Great Northern Highway close to the community, and subsequently Taylor and Brooks began to sell artwork from the roadhouse under the business name Narangunny Art Traders (NAT). Three months later, in early 1996, the Warmun Community Council arranged for Taylor and Brooks to move

into the community and live in the old post office, a large elevated dwelling, which in the past had housed the community advisors.¹² Taylor and Brooks ran an 'art centre' from the old post office and prepared the canvases on site for a group of older, saleable artists who came and painted there and were given food and looked after. The work produced for Warmun Traditional Artists and NAT went primarily to Kimberley Art in Melbourne and two Sydney dealers, Adrian Newstead of Coo-ee Art and Christopher Hodges of Utopia Art Sydney. Others who also bought from NAT included dealers such as Indigenart, now Mossenson Gallery in Perth, who were also buying from Waringarri Arts, and Helen Read of Palya Art and the collectors she brought to Warmun on her Digeri Art Tours, among them Colin and Liz Laverty.

The de facto art centre arrangements at Warmun unravelled in October 1997, when Helen Read of Digeri Art Tours/Palya Art sent a letter of complaint to the Warmun Community Council. The incident was 'the catalyst' for establishing the community-owned art centre. Read visited Warmun with a group of art collectors in October 1996 and again in 1997, and when she enquired, Maxine Taylor told Read that the enterprise was a non-profit organisation recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission¹³. Helen Read 'became suspicious when she couldn't locate the enterprise in the ATSIC Visual Arts and Crafts Directory'.¹⁴ Read raised the matter with the Warmun Community Council and the artists, and after a series of meetings in December 1997, it was revealed that: 'Warmun Traditional Arts or Narangunny Art Trader was a private business owned by Maxine Taylor and Terrence Brooks'.¹⁵ Warmun Community Council voted to rescind their arrangements with NAT. Adrian Newstead of Coo-ee Art and Tom Spender of Kimberley Art both submitted letters to the Warmun Community Council supporting

Taylor and Brooks. Christopher Hodges of Utopia Art Sydney and Dianne Mossenson of Indigenart did not. The Warmun Community Council further resolved to set about establishing their own community-owned and community-controlled art centre and wanted the old post office, where Taylor and Brooks had been living and running the art centre, as premises for the new organisation. They were required to vacate the old post office by 30 December.¹⁶

After Rover Thomas's death, at Warmun at Easter 1998, documents (re)emerged which showed Rover Thomas had signed the rights in his work over to NAT. At least five other 'older painters have signed with Narangunny Art Traders and it has come into question whether the artists fully understood what they were putting their names to'.¹⁷ The artists are said 'to have signed contracts... which now claims exclusive access to all income from works'¹⁸ and 'In Thomas's case the income is substantial'.¹⁹ Furthermore the Rover Thomas agreement was signed both by Thomas and his daughter Jane Yalunga. Freddie Timms acknowledged he painted for NAT but he was suspicious and refused to sign the exclusivity agreement. He spoke to locals who were on the Warmun Community Council about his concerns, in particular how people were paid: 'She (Maxine) just opened the front window and chucked it down from the top and sung "wak wak" that mean crow. I think the old people didn't like it'.²⁰ In their defence, Taylor and Books argued that: 'The authenticity of the works is fully documented by NAT and recorded by video and photographing the working artists. All of the artists sign their works and they receive 60% of all sales'.²¹ When attempts were made to enforce these agreements Waringarri Arts opposed the claim. Maxine Taylor conceded Rover Thomas had suffered from serious illness before he signed the agreement but denied it affected his judgment: 'His mind was as sharp as ever'.²²

A flurry of legal and press activity ensued about Rover Thomas's health and capacity, and the agreements were not enforced. After Warmun Art Centre (WAC) opened in September 1998, the manager, Anna Moulton, said that Jack Britten continued to paint for NAT.²³ By contrast other senior artists, including Queenie McKenzie and Hector Jandany, were distressed by the way they were treated by NAT and threw their weight behind the new community-owned art centre.

I have not seen the records of these entities and have only seen, in auction catalogues, the works that have appeared on the secondary market, so I am not in a position to comment on their authenticity or the conditions under which they were produced or the remunerations received by the artists. There are grounds for regarding them as a class as problematic; however each work needs to be individually assessed on its merits when it appears. What does concern me more is the blurring of provenance descriptors and the way that the good name and transparent records of the Warmun Art Centre are invoked by these other short-lived entities, to disguise the actual and very unclear nature of their relationship with the artists and to trade off the reputation that WAC and the art centre system have built over many decades.

Caveat Emptor – Check the Catalogue Number

Buyers should check the provenance details carefully whenever 'Warmun Art Centre' is invoked, to ensure they know from whom they are buying. The first indicator is the date; is it before or after 1998 when WAC opened? The next step is to check the catalogue number; Narangunny Art Traders/Warmun Traditional Arts either uses N, NA or NAT as the prefix and the artists' initials as the suffix or some combination; for example NAT 0154 or QM0154 or N0154-QM, whereas Warmun Art Centre uses

WAC as the prefix on its catalogue number and the date of the work as the suffix. When Warmun Art Centre was incorporated in 1998, it was clearly mindful that this could be a problem and described itself as 'Kelarriny Arts – Warmun Art Centre' to distinguish themselves from the previous incarnations. However, within a year of trading this nomenclature had become cumbersome and was abandoned.

In 1999, the year after WAC opened, when Jennifer Isaacs was collecting work for the Gantner-Myer Aboriginal Art Collection, it is clear that she dealt with both entities. In the catalogue, acknowledgments for *Spirit Country*, Isaacs thanks: 'Kevin Kelly formerly of Waringarri Arts and now of Red Rock Art, Kununurra...Maxine Taylor, formerly of Warmun Arts in the Kimberley...Anna Moulton and Jonathon Kimberley of Warmun Arts, Warmun'.²⁴ Isaacs' descriptor 'Warmun Arts' does not distinguish between these two substantially different entities. Subsequently the approach has been to ignore the previous incarnations in all Warmun Art Centre publications and histories. This has left the field wide open for others to take advantage of the situation and it has not helped buyers of East Kimberley art to make sense of provenance descriptors. When I queried Tim Klingender and Crispin Gutteridge of Sotheby's about their acceptance of this loose Warmun Art Centre descriptor, they replied variously that these entities were the (only) Art Centre at Warmun at the time.²⁵ This reasoning, while understandable, highlights the problem. Adrian Newstead has consistently promulgated the view that this was the first Warmun art centre with simply a different administrative structure:

Narangunny Art Traders is the trading name used by Maxine Taylor and Terry Brooks who became the first

art co-ordinators in the Warmun community in 1997. The art centre under Taylor and Brooks operated as Warmun Traditional Arts until 1999 when a new constitution and incorporation led to the current Warmun Art Centre.²⁶

What is an Art Centre and Why Does it Matter?

What is an art centre? It is useful to think in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. These entities operating in Warmun at the time fulfilled criteria that is necessary for an art centre; they operated in the community, they bought and sold art from the community, money was paid to artists, artwork certificates were issued, artists were looked after and exhibitions were arranged. They did not, however, meet the critical criteria: community ownership and community control, accuracy of records, transparency of financial arrangements and accountability to regulatory third parties. In the study by Felicity Wright, art and craft centres are defined as:

organisations operating in remote Australia owned and controlled by Aboriginal people. Their principal activity is facilitating the production and marketing of art and craft. A centre may be independently incorporated or auspiced by an Aboriginal company or incorporated association.²⁷

Art centres are important because they are 'often the only source of externally generated income in remote communities' and they are 'special cases' and 'not conventional businesses'²⁸ because they are 'directly accountable to their stakeholders'.²⁹ Compared to private dealers, where there is 'no transparency', the art centre

'has a set of responsibilities to the artists, the executive, and the Registrar of Corporations'.³⁰ Art centres are incorporated under the Federal Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (1974) and 'as such members have a range of legal responsibilities and moral obligations which have a bearing on issues of authenticity'.³¹ Art centres provide verifiable documentation.

Art consultant Michael Reid advises collectors to 'look for the community art centre stock numbers on the reverse of the canvas. Having found the stock number it is advised to contact the relevant arts community to cross-reference their sale records with your painting'.³² Art centre archives are 'an extremely important record of the history and evolution of the art centre, the artists and the wider industry' and have 'implications for the entire industry in the light of current debates about authenticity and provenance'.³³

What are the implications for authenticity and provenance? Consider this example: a Rover Thomas painting was offered at auction by Menzies Art Brands in September 2009 as Lot 142 *Dingo Dreaming*, 1996, natural earth pigments and synthetic binders on linen. Provenance: 'Warmun Traditional Artists, Western Australia, Kimberley Art Gallery, Melbourne, cat KA-RT-0104/96'.³⁴ It had been previously offered at Lawson-Menzies in May 2005 as Lot 199, when its provenance was described as: 'Warmun Arts Centre, WA, Private Collection, USA'.³⁵ This is a prime example of provenance blurring; implying it was from the Warmun Art Centre, whereas actually it was from Narangunny Art Traders or Warmun Traditional Arts.

At the time of the 2005 auction Adrian Newstead sent a fax of the Warmun Traditional Artists certificate to Warmun Art Centre asserting its association: 'In 1996 there was definitely an art centre in the Warmun community despite its constitutional change in

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Warmun Traditional Artists

Catalogue Number: RT0104

Artist Name: Rover Thomas

Age: 70 years

Language: Lakatja-Wangkangtja

Sub Section: Joolama

Artist Background:

Born in the desert region of the Warburton Ranges, at a place called "Three Wells" on the community of Jigalong, as a young boy Rover hunted and gathered the desert food with his Father and family.

"Gudiyas" (white men) would roam and "take" young boys for work on Kimberley cattle stations, Rover was one of these boys, brought to Texas Downs where he learnt about fencing and droving and here he underwent tribal initiation and was accepted as one of the Kija people of "Warramun" (Warmun).

Artwork Name: "Raba" (Dogs)

Image Id: RT0104

Date Completed: 5/7/96

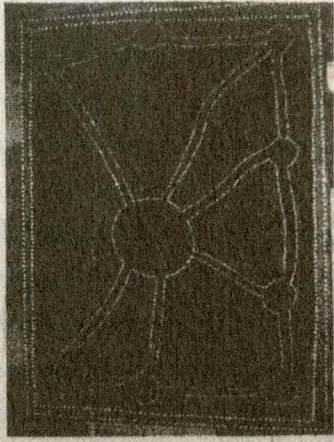

Size: 140/110 cm

Medium: Ink on Canvas

Artwork Description:

Rover depicts a scene from his days as a desert well-keeper, Mother and baby dingoes and the well-worn tracks mark as they play and hunt.

Price: \$

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Figure 4.9: Faxed certificate sent to Warmun Art Centre

1998'.³⁶ The certificate attached with the fax is interesting reading. Under the heading 'Artist Background', it claims that Rover Thomas was born at a place called 'Three wells on the community of Jigalong' and taken by 'Gudiyas (white men) as young boy to work on Texas Downs, where he learnt about fencing and droving and...underwent tribal initiation and was accepted as one of the Kija people of Warramun (Warmun)'. This mix of half-truths and complete fabrications is an example of how poor and unreliable the documentation that comes from these sources

can be. Warmun Art Centre declined to provide a certificate. The painting did not sell and immediately after, in October 2009, it was offered on the internet auction sites ebay and Gumtree as an:

amazing work...huge...superb provenance...painted for Warmun Traditional Artists – the predecessor of the Warmun Art Centre (eg. Sotheby's regularly sells Rover paintings from both these organisations). Three certificates (1) Warmun Traditional Artists (2) Lawson-Menzies signed by one of Australia's leading Aboriginal art experts and (3) Kimberley Art, signed by director, Peter Harrison.

Three certificates but not enough, as Adrian Newstead knew. He wanted a certificate from the only certificate-issuing entity with the credibility and authority to implicitly trump the other three, the community owned and operated art centre.

Notes

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- 6 M. Neale, *Yiribana*, p. 232.
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- Department, formerly Department of Aboriginal Sites, Western Australian Museum, Perth, 1995–6, p. 2.
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