

SERENDIPITY and SAVAGE DOGS

Kimberley painter Jack Britten was an associate and mate of Rover Thomas.

When did Jack Britten begin painting?

Today it is commonplace for dealer, Adrian Newstead in his top 200 Aboriginal Artists - Profile of Jack Britten who is incidentally no 41. Rover Thomas is No. 2. To state as a matter of fact that:

“Jack Britten first painted in the early 1970s before almost all his contemporaries, including Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji had picked up a brush. Taught to paint by his grandparents his earliest works employed traditional materials such as bush gum, sap from the Bloodwood tree and kangaroo blood.”

Adrian Newstead is confident in his declaration because he is implicitly relying on two things - earlier researchers statements and the existence of a number of early boards in Hank Ebes' collection and others which Newstead has offered through Menzies Art Brands and others again which he has on offer from his gallery, Coo-ee art, all with very early dates,

Those earlier researchers were, Eric Kjellgren (1999) in his Phd following Judith Ryan in 'Images of Power' (1993). They asserted that Jack Britten began painting at Guda Guda/ Nine Mile before Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji. Judith Ryan's information comes from Tony Ellwood, in mss (Ellwood, 1992) and his article, 'Aboriginal Art of the East Kimberley' in *Gallery; Monthly magazine of the National Gallery Society of Victoria*, April (Ellwood, 1993). Tony Ellwood was the second coordinator of Waringarri Arts after Joel Smoker (1985-90).

Ellwood, who was at Waringarri for eighteen months (1990-2) writes:

“Britten started painting at nine mile at Wyndham before Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji began” (Ellwood, 1993).

Ellwood does not cite his sources for the article, however it is clear he has used Frances Kofod's interview with Rover Thomas done around this time c1991 and I assume the two previous biographies produced by his predecessor at Waringarri, Joel Smoker, in 1988 for Ace Bourke at Hogarth Galleries and the October 1989 catalogue essay written for *Turkey Creek Recent Work* at Deutscher Gertrude Street, and sent to Vivien Anderson where Joel Smoker writes:

“I had been visiting George (Mung Mung) and Rover (Thomas) regularly when they were both living at Frog Hollow in 1987, when the community leader there, Jack Britten showed me some paintings he had done on bits of asbestos. He said that he was a painter too and asked whether I would supply him with boards, which I agreed to do on my next trip” (Smoker. J. Essay from *Turkey Creek recent Work*, 1989).

Jack Britten lived at Guda Guda Nine Mile prior to the establishment of Warmun and from there worked to set up the Wurreranginy outstation at Frog Hollow, thirty kilometres south of Turkey Creek. Warmun Community worker Cath Elderton recalls assisting Jack Britten to get the outstation set up as part of her work with the fledgling Balangarri Association. (Elderton, Interview, Bondi, 2010).

“In 1982 he moved there (Frog Hollow) permanently. This is where he now paints” (Waringarri Artists Information: Jack Britten, undated, no author cited, produced Sept 1989 by Joel Smoker, see: Waringarri Letters Files).

Ellwood seems to have extrapolated from the statement, “he was painter too”, to Britten beginning painting (boards) before Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji. Joel Smoker has reiterated the point:

“I’m pretty sure that Jack Britten had not done any commercial painting before he approached me about painting. He may have painted at the Warmun School. The work he showed me was some scratchy painting on a bit of asbestos” (Smoker, email, 9 July, 2012).

There could also be confusion about being a maker of artefacts that were painted and what we would understand as *painting*, meaning painting on board on a portable 2D support. There is no doubt Jack Britten was painting artefacts and quite likely to have been doing so when he lived at Guda Guda, Nine Mile near Wyndham and had been taught how to do so by his parents and grandparents. Subsequently Judith Ryan relied on Tony Ellwood and Eric Kjellgren relied on Judith Ryan, neither apparently referred back to either Smoker’s artist biography or his catalogue essay.

Jack Britten photographed with his first painting

Eric Kjellgren (1999) in his PhD followed Ryan (1993) and to strengthen his argument reproduced a photograph, “Fig 3.1 Undated photograph of Gija painter Jack Britten posing with a shield and what he described to me as his “first painting” (Kjellgren, 1999, p167). In my interview with Joel Smoker, I did not query him about the Jack Britten story, but Joel Smoker mentioned it, when we were talking about Rover Thomas and Frog Hollow. Joel Smoker recalled that the houses at Frog Hollow had been designed and built by Waringarri corporation, “so we had a bit to do with it” he said. Joel Smoker who is an artist and professional photographer mentioned: “In fact I’ve got a photograph of him with a bit of asbestos that he’d painted a painting on.” (Smoker, Interview, Mundaring 2010).

I assumed that Joel Smoker’s photograph of Jack Britten must be the one referred to by Eric Kjellgren. I went to Bruny island at far tip of Tasmania in pursuit of Rimas Riauba. Rimas had been the assistant bookkeeper to the Warmun community from October 1983 until October 1984 and he was himself an artist and so particularly interested in the art that was happening at this early time. I had been told about him by Bill Genat, who had been the bookkeeper who had employed him. Bill was working in the Centre for Population Health at the University of Melbourne and he told me Rimas might have some interesting information.

Similarly Cath Elderton, whom I already knew had been at Warmun also told me I should talk to Rimas so that was why I went to Bruny island, which is certainly about as far away from Warmun as you can get and still be in Australia. Rimas keeps some very serious dogs at his Bruny Island place.

As it happened, soon after, I returned to Melbourne, Rimas Riauba sent me two photographs of Jack Britten along with some others of Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji that he had taken when he returned to Warmun in 1988 at which time he commissioned work from Paddy Jamanji and Rover Thomas. Rimas Riauba's two photographs show Jack Britten holding a painted didge in the first and a shield in the second. In both photographs there is a small painting of a face, beside him, resting on the ground against the verandah upright:

“When I visited in 1988 he (Jack Britten) wanted to sell me the one of the face but I declined to my later regret. There is a didgeridoo which he painted and also spear shield which I did buy. I am pretty sure these are amongst the earliest of Jack's works, and at the time Rover was staying at Jack's outstation at Frog Hollow “(Riauba, email, 27 October 2010).

Eric Kjellgren's undated photograph of Jack Britten taken by an unknown photographer is not by Joel Smoker as I thought it must be. Kjellgren's "Fig 3:1" is in fact Rimas Riauba's second photograph taken in 1988 cropped somewhat, but clearly the same photograph. The Waringarri Stock Books show that the first Jack Britten works, two canvas paintings, were purchased in December 1987 at Frog Hollow at the same time as work by Paddy Jumbigi (sic) and George Mung Mung. Waringarri had first purchased works by George Mung Mung in November 1986 (Waringarri Stock Books Vol.1.) There is evidence in the auction records that Mary Macha purchased two works by Jack Britten in 1987 and their catalogue numbers suggest they were his first two works, JB 11087 and JB 21087 purchased in October 1987.

Given Jack Britten's well known independence and entrepreneurial flair, which I will explain in a minute. It is not surprising that having shown his first efforts to Joel Smoker and securing canvases or the promise of some, next time he visited, Jack Britten made his own arrangements with Mary Macha on her next visit to Rover Thomas. Jack Britten painted for Waringarri until, according to Frances Kofod, Tony Ellwood changed the payment system and Jack Britten was furious about it and determined to go his own way outside Waringarri (Kofod, Interview, Selby, 2009). Similarly, Cath Elderton described him as, “adamantly independent” (Elderton, Interview, Bondi, 2010).

Unfortunately misinformation is retailed perpetually and gets embellished as it goes, so a journalist writing about Warmun art and Jack Britten in 1998, blithely asserts:

“Unfortunately Rover Thomas, whom Britten taught to paint, is unable to paint after a series of strokes and has retired in his late 60s” (Gould, 1998)

In other words my research proves when Jack Britten began painting ie in 1987. And the existence in the Hank Ebes Nangara Collection of a cluster of purported early East Kimberley boards- 14 by Rover Thomas, 10 by Paddy Jamanji and two collaborative works by Paddy Jamanji, and Rover Thomas, 1 by George Mung Mung and 3 works by Jack Britten painted in 1983, 1983, and 1984 raises serious questions.
