

## **PROVENANCE ASSESSMENT REPORT**

of an extremely early work  
by Rover Thomas  
provisionally titled -  
Kangaroo (at Barawooban)

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## **The assertion**

It is asserted that the vendor collected a painting of a kangaroo by Rover Thomas that they bought from the Turkey Creek/Warmun Roadhouse in 1987, and a photograph of the artist with the painting taken at the time, is offered as evidence.

## **The Vendor**

The vendor was a well-known and respected collector and dealer in Aboriginal Art. Their academic background in anthropology and experience as a field worker in remote communities in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley made them well placed to observe, document and collect emerging Aboriginal art.

By the late 1980s the vendor was focused on the West Kimberley. At Warmun there was little room for another private dealer, due to Mary Macha's pre-existing involvement, and the creation of Waringarri Art Centre in 1985, however the vendor collected Rover Thomas works from time to time and in the 1993 Special Issue of Art Monthly advertised themselves, as "representing Rover Thomas".

## **The painting**

The painting, Kangaroo (at Barawooban) is clearly a very early work by Rover Thomas, possibly one of his earliest and the full context of its creation must be appreciated.

I have not physically examined the work and am relying on photographs of it. I am therefore authenticating the provenance of the painting and commenting on its appearance. It appears to be painted on recycled board from roughly applied locally ground ochres fixed with bush gum and there is some pencil underdrawing.

## **Sources of Evidence**

I quote extensively from Chapter 3 'From Dreamer to Painter' of my PhD 'Vindicating Rover Thomas', UoM, 2012, which was an examination of the oeuvre of Rover Thomas, undertaken in order to develop a method of assessing the provenance of his work.

I draw extensively on the information provided by Rimas Riauba, a person who I met in 2010 and with whom I have maintained a relationship over this last decade and who I know to be honest and of integrity.

I refer to correspondence between Mary Macha, Kim Akerman and Chips Mackinolty found in the Mary Macha Archives.

To identify the painting's subject I rely on the Waringarri Art Centre Paintings Catalogue and Paintings Certificates and 'Roba Painting Subjects', Rover Thomas Painting Subjects Compendium, Waringarri Arts: Artist Reference, prepared by Eric Kjellgren with assistance from Frances Kofod for Kevin Kelly in c1995.

## Context

The answer to the question of when Rover Thomas began painting is entwined with the beginning of what became known as the East Kimberley art movement, also known as the Turkey Creek style, and it requires simultaneously considering the early work of Paddy Jaminji. There is considerable doubt and confusion about when Rover Thomas began painting.

The first level of confusion arises from the distinction between Rover Thomas as the dreamer and originator of the Gurirr Gurirr and his later role as a painter of it ... There is no evidence Rover Thomas was painting before 1983 and I argue that it is only later in 1983, after the first three sets of (Gurirr Gurirr) boards had been sold and documented, that he begins to paint (Spinner, S. Phd , 2012).

None of these first three sets of Gurirr Gurirr boards, were painted by Rover Thomas and most were painted by Paddy Jaminji.

The popular consensus was that Rover Thomas began to paint in 1982. It has now settled on 1983, and certainly no well-provenanced work appeared before 1983.

*The earliest well provenanced works by Rover Thomas in public and private collection are from 1983. They are sourced from Mary Macha and painted on board variously noted as, plywood, composition board and hardboard (Spinner, S. Phd, 2012).*

It is amongst these works, in a major public collection, this painting can be located.

## What is the subject?

Rover Thomas has chosen a secular story, which he knows from his own local experience. It has nothing to do with the Gurirr Gurirr and it is not a Gija ancestral story. It is set on Texas Downs, where he worked as stockman immediately prior to moving to Turkey Creek/Warmun.

It is about Barawooban Hill where, “there is a big hole in this hill in which kangaroos sometimes get trapped. People can easily climb down and catch them. One person cannot do this or he might easily be trapped” (‘Roba Painting Subjects’, Waringarri Arts, c1995 p.6).

The hole the kangaroo has fallen into forms a natural trap. It is depicted as the distinctive bulging teardrop shape that encloses the kangaroo in the painting. Another work painted soon after, *Fish Hole on the way to Texas Downs* references the story and the shape is repeated in both these paintings. Fish Hole Range is on Texas Downs in the Osmond Range east of Turkey Creek/Warmun.

In the Dreamtime Jirrinny the Kangaroo is boss for law and he sets out from Turkey Creek/Warmun and travels to Nyalia country near Well 33 where Rover Thomas was born. So a painting by Rover Thomas of an ostensibly secular, everyday kangaroo can still have mythological resonance.

## **Rimas Riauba**

*Rimas Riauba was an artist who was employed by the Balangarri Corporation as an assistant bookkeeper ... Riauba was living at Warmun from October 1983 until September 1984. Riauba lived in a caravan directly opposite Paddy Jaminji's house ... Being an artist himself, Riauba was particularly interested in what was happening and he says that the first Rover Thomas work he saw was a painting of a kangaroo hanging up in the Wungkul community store (Spinner, S.PhD , 2012).*

I assumed the work Rimas Riauba was referring to was the work called, *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs*, 1984, which I was aware of because it had appeared in Sotheby's 1998 auction described as, "purchased directly from the artist on 19 March, 1984 by the managers of the community store at Warmun (Turkey Creek)" (Lot 150 Sotheby's 'Aboriginal, African & Oceanic Art', November 9, 1998).

However, there was an anomaly because Rimas Riauba distinctly remembers that a painting of a kangaroo was there when he first arrived which would mean it was painted in 1983 (Riauba, email, 2012) and *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs*, was painted in 1984.

*Riauba's recollection is that Rover Thomas did not paint many works at all while Riauba was at Warmun except for Mary Macha ... (and) Chips Mackinolty of Mimi Arts in Katherine. Rimas Riauba believes that, as it was well known how interested he was in art, any painting Rover Thomas did, he would have shown him, and Riauba speculates that a lot was no doubt happening in the background as Rover Thomas negotiated his right to paint Gija sites and stories with Paddy Jaminji and other senior men ... Rimas Riauba strongly believes it was he who brought Rover Thomas to the attention of Mary Macha, but it seems more likely she already knew of his interest in painting as he (Rover Thomas) had come forward and told her so before Riauba arrived at Warmun in October 1983 (Rimas Riauba, interview, Bruny Island, 2010, Spinner, S.PhD , 2012).*

After our interview on Bruny Island in 2010, Rimas Riauba and I maintained ongoing contact by telephone and email correspondence, in the course of which, Riauba sent me numerous and various images of paintings and people, as he gradually digitised his slide collection.

The digital files Riauba sent me included some works by Rover Thomas he commissioned when he returned to Warmun in 1988. There were technical issues with sending/receiving the files and they were not necessarily in chronological order.

### **A photograph of a painting**

Among these digitised slides he sent me was a one of painting of a kangaroo. It was not *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs* but another painting of a kangaroo. Rimas Riauba had photographed the kangaroo painting he saw at the time, but when he spoke to me for the interview, it was not clear that he had photographed it then, or that he had a photograph of it. Later he sent me the photograph he had taken. He could not explain the existence of the other kangaroo painting, *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs*, 1984. Riauba was unaware of it at Turkey Creek/ Warmun when he was there.

At the time I received the image of the kangaroo from Rimas Riauba, it was out of place. It was not the Sotheby's work, *Fish Hole on the way to Texas Downs*. I did not recognise it, as it had not appeared anywhere at auction or in any illustration and I could not verify it, nor confidently place it in his oeuvre. I did not disbelieve Rimas Riauba but I could not corroborate his story about the (other) kangaroo painting.

When I was presented with the work collected by the vendor, I recognised it as the same work Rimas Riauba photographed, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)*. Riauba added that upon inquiry, he was told by the manager of the community store that the painting was by Rover Thomas (Rimas Riauba, email, June 2020). The account given by Rimas Riauba about the painting he saw in 1983 and his photograph of it, and the account of the painting bought by the vendor in 1987 from Rover Thomas, and the vendor's photograph of Rover Thomas with the painting corroborate each other and demonstrate that it is one and the same painting, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* at different times in its life.

### **Two early paintings of a kangaroo**

In other words, we now know there were two early paintings of a single kangaroo, both painted by Rover Thomas at around the same time and both of which at some point, were hung in or about the community store at Warmun/Turkey Creek, although it appears they were never hung there at the same time.

### **How could this happen?**

It is now well established that Rover Thomas was proactive and pragmatic in developing his career as a painter. Once an arrangement had been made with Mary Macha, Rover Thomas would not have regarded it as precluding his entrepreneurial activities ie. to paint some other thing(s) for sale in the community store, so long as he found his own materials - support and ochres - and avoided any conflicts of interest according to his own lights.

It is possible that Rover Thomas put the painting that Rimas Riauba saw, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* in the store for sale and the manager upon seeing it and thinking it could be improved upon, if the artist was in possession of better materials, commissioned another one. The manager bought the second painting called *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs* and kept it under wraps so to speak, until it was offered for sale at Sotheby's. Perhaps the commissioner found better materials and passed them onto the artist, or the artist had access to them himself from materials supplied by Mary Macha.

*Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs* is more abstracted and resolved than *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)*. The ochre also appears to be better managed, less streaky and denser. Rimas Riauba told me the manager of the community store was Yvonne Tegg, the wife of Alan Tegg, who was the Community Advisor at Warmun at the time. The community store called Wungkul was established in 1979.

Rimas Riauba photographed *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* sometime between when he arrived in late 1983 and early 1984, and Riauba is adamant that the painting was there when he arrived in October 1983, making the date of its execution, before October 1983 and putting it amongst the earliest works by Rover Thomas.

In March 1984 another painting of a kangaroo called *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs* was painted by Rover Thomas and sold to the manager of the Community Store. It was later sold by Sotheby's. It appears that Rimas Riauba never saw this painting when it was at Turkey Creek/Warmun.

Thus there are two paintings of the same subject with the same three elements, the kangaroo, a hill or hills in the foreground, and a shape that encloses and frames the kangaroo.

In 1987, the vendor visited Warmun and bought *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* and another painting, *Untitled (Map of Turkey Creek and Surrounds)* c1984, which were both on display at the Turkey Creek Roadhouse; a separate establishment from the community store. The vendor took photographs of the artist Rover Thomas beside each of these paintings and contextual information corroborates the date they were taken as 1987. So both paintings the vendor collected were painted before 1987 and the vendor dated *Untitled (Map of Turkey Creek and Surrounds)* to c1984.

From Rimas Riauba's memory of seeing the work in the store and the slide photograph he took, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* can be dated to 1983 when Riauba saw it first in October of that year.

The locale of the painting had changed from the community store to a more public place, the Roadhouse on the Great Northern Highway. Warmun Community purchased the Turkey Creek Roadhouse in 1986 the same year the highway was sealed through the Kimberley. The roadhouse, previously known locally as Harry's Place was established in 1975. It was the address to which Mary Macha sent pre-cut marine ply boards to Paddy Jaminji and Rover Thomas.

#### A contemporaneous confirmation

In 1998 Mary Macha, prompted by Kim Akerman, asked Chips Mackinolty who had run Mimi Arts in Katherine if he could recall when canvas was introduced to the Turkey Creek artists. In the fax reply Mackinolty sent, titled 'The curious case of calico, canvas and the Kimberley', he writes,

"As far as Rover goes he simply was not painting at the time (1983), though by late in that year there was a single painting by him on board nailed to the wall of the community store at Warmun".

Mary Macha showed me this fax in 2014, so this information did not figure in my thesis.

While the fax does not mention the subject of the painting, it is likely that the painting Mackinolty saw in situ in late 1983, around the time Rimas Riauba saw it, was *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)*.

Two nail holes appear to be visible on the painting, one at the top right hand side, and the other diagonally opposite on the lower left hand side, suggestive of it being "nailed to the wall", albeit very efficiently. To put up a painting in this way would be consistent with what we know of Rover Thomas's approach to doing things.

## Comparing the two kangaroo paintings

Stylistically comparing these two early depictions of the kangaroo, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* is more naturalistic and less confident both in the handling of the forms, mastery of dotting technique and convention, and the application of the ochre. This supports the view that it was painted before *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs*, which is dated precisely to 19 March 1984.

The subject clearly interested Rover Thomas. There are later works referring to the same place and aspects of the story, *Barrawoba*, 1986 painted for Mary Macha, (Holmes a Court Collection) and *Barawooban-Texas Downs*, 1994 painted for Waringarri Arts in Kununurra. In these later works, his depictions of this subject became more minimalist and abstracted and the kangaroo is not represented at all.

So the fact that there are two paintings painted around the same time, 1983/4 of notionally the same subject, a kangaroo trapped in a hole, while apparently unlikely, is in my opinion, actually plausible.

## The chain of evidence

It was asserted that the vendor collected a painting of a kangaroo by Rover Thomas, which they bought from the Turkey Creek/Warmun Roadhouse in 1987, and a photograph of the artist with the painting taken at the time, was offered as evidence.

The following chain of evidence supports the assertion -

1. Rimas Riauba was living at Warmun in October 1983 and saw the kangaroo painting *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* by Rover Thomas in the store. Identified as such by the Community Manager. Sometime after that Rimas Riauba photographed it. (Information and photograph given to Suzanne Spinner in 2010/2011/2020 by Rimas Riauba)
2. Chip Mackinolty of Mimi Arts who visited Warmun regularly saw a painting by Rover Thomas nailed to the wall in the community store in late 1983. (Information in fax to Mary Macha in 1998, shown to Suzanne Spinner in 2014))
3. Rover Thomas sold another Kangaroo painting *Fish hole on the way to Texas Downs* to the store manager at Warmun in March 1984. (Information given by the vendor to Tim Klingender at Sothebys in 1998)
4. The vendor visited Warmun in 1987 and bought a painting of a kangaroo, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* from Rover Thomas and photographed Rover Thomas with the painting. The Vendor died in 2012. (Information given by the Vendor's estate to the Dealer)
5. The painting, *Kangaroo (at Barawooban)* was put forward for consideration in 2020 by the Dealer for the Vendor's Estate and recognised by Suzanne Spinner, the writer of this report, as the same painting Rimas Riauba had photographed in October 1983.

## **Conclusion**

I am satisfied on all the evidence available, that the painting of a kangaroo brought to me for consideration by the dealer on behalf of the Vendor's Estate, is what it is purported to be: a painting by Rover Thomas, which is currently titled Kangaroo and was collected by the vendor at Warmun in 1987. Moreover it can be confidently dated to prior to October 1983 and could be more accurately titled, "*Kangaroo (at Barawooban)*."

Report finalised 4 November 2020

**Dr Suzanne Spinner**