

ODE TO NORA WOMPI

1 September - 6 October 2018





In association with Martumili Artists and Warlayirti Artists.
Suzanne O'Connell Gallery presents a selection of works from these two art communities,
paying tribute to the great and dearly missed artist known as Nora Wompi.

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1 September - 6 October 2018

◀ LEFT (Detail)
Kunawarrtji Ngurra, 14/371, 2014

Suzanne O'Connell Gallery
Australian Contemporary and Indigenous Art

COVER
Nora Wompi: Balgo Hills, 2011
Image courtesy of Warlayirti Artists



FORWARD

This exhibition marks the final chapter of a long and joyous professional partnership and friendship with Martu woman, Nora Wompi. She was a historic figure, a true cultural leader, who as a teenager had her first contact with European and Western life.

During her lifetime Wompi travelled and painted between the Western Australian (WA) communities of Kunawarritji and Balgo Hills, including a brief residency at Fitzroy Crossing. It was in these places she created the works she is known and respected for. She walked in two worlds, her traditional life and as one of the most collectable and beloved artists of her generation. The works she created told of her home country, the stories and teachings of her people and she bravely presented these to the world so that we may have the opportunity to know of her people's rich history.

After her passing late last year we are left with an incredible body of work ranging from 2010 and 2015 from the archives for her final solo exhibition. This exhibition showcases her growth as an artist, her authority as an Elder and Traditional Owner as well as her supreme talent.

In this catalogue readers will enjoy essays from art centre managers, curators, myself and those who worked with and knew her. All of us were touched by her tenacity, vigor, intimate relationship with country and her amazing talent with the paintbrush.

I hope you enjoy and learn from these texts and come to know more, of such an incredible and historic woman.

Suzanne O'Connell is the Owner / Director of the Suzanne O'Connell Gallery New Farm, Brisbane, Australia.

◀ LEFT
Nora Wompi, Balgo Hills, 2011
 Image courtesy of Warlayirti Artists



'Like all her best works, it is painted with the unmistakable confidence that marks her as of Australia's finest gestural painters. But it is also a work of extraordinary calm.'

Henry F. Skerritt

AN ODE TO WOMPI

Let us stand before a final masterpiece. With reverence, let ourselves to be swallowed by its breathless economy of marks; its whispered silences like that final notes of a profound requiem. Let us take a moment to be quiet in the lingering presence of genius. *Big Tuwwa at Philip Bell's birthplace at Ngara Apal Bolgo Kakarra (2015)* was painted in the last years of Wompi's life. Like all her best works, it is painted with the unmistakable confidence that marks her as one of Australia's finest gestural painters. But it is also a work of extraordinary calm. It is the work of an artist on the cusp of their return to the ancestral realm. This is a different confidence to the typical bravado of abstract expressionists: it is a painting whose self-assurance is drawn from the artist's unity with their world, their becoming one with the land from which they came.

◀ LEFT
Nora Wompi, Kunawarritji 2013
 Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell

As we pay our respects to this under-heralded titan of Australian painting, it is worth considering how Big Tuwwa at Philip Bell's birthplace represents both the culmination and continuation of Wompi's remarkable artistic project. This exhibition offers a remarkable opportunity to survey the works produced in the final seven years of Wompi's life, as she moved between working with Warlayirti Artist at Wirrimanu (Balgo) and Martumili Artists in Newman. This covers a period of increasing minimalism in Wompi's practice, as the defined line work, circles and dots of early paintings were increasingly replaced with broad fields of gestural colour. This shift is clearly evident when one compares works from 2010, such as *Yurunkurnpa 2010* [10-1185] or *Kunawarritji Community (Well 33) 2010* [184/10] with the breathtaking grace of works such as *Kunawarritji 2012* [248/12] or *Untitled 2015* [15-973].

How might we interpret this move? With their thick, viscous skeins of impasto paint, Wompi's paintings seem to melt onto the eye. Layers of overlapping colours blur, making forms difficult to define; the desert landscape shimmers into being, like a mirage upon the horizon. The movement of the artist's hand is clearly visible in the thick brushstrokes, which run across the canvas like trails in the wilderness. The encrusted dots of early works have given way to broad swathes of shifting colour. Where the early works had a gravelly sense of place that evoked the material presence of the landscape, Wompi's late works present a much more peripatetic, nomadic understanding of space.

After 2005, Wompi's paintings increased in both scale and confidence. But her development should not be seen as a process of metamorphosis, so much as an artistic form of artistic excavation, stripping away the crust to reveal the metaphysical essence of the landscape. In this sense, her final works might be read as being less concerned with the visible features of the landscape than with its underlying spiritual meanings. They are paintings of experience, not cynical or world-weary, but acutely aware of the truth of the matter, of what is permanent and what fades away. Exploring this intangible essence required Wompi to develop a unique abstract, and highly phenomenological, visual language. The clearly identifiable iconography of desert painting – with its recognisable symbols for waterholes, campsites and rockholes – was slowly replaced with a more fluid, gestural style. The specificity of particular places, stories and sites gave way to grand, totalised renderings of her country around Kunawarritji. These are 'big pictures' that required a 'big picture' approach. The spiritual essence that they seek to capture cannot be described using a predetermined lexicon of signs, but required the development of an artistic language based on emotion and intuition.

Born around 1934 at Lilbaru near Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, Wompi belongs to a fading generation of senior Indigenous people who grew up in the desert, learning the solemn codes of the nomadic lifestyle. Consistent with this nomadic outlook, her biography is defined by significant travels: walking with her mother to Billiluna Station and then onto Balgo Mission; relocating



Nora Wompi, Kunawarritji, 2015
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists



Bugai Whyoulter, Nora Wompi, Nora Nungabar, Kunawarritji 2013
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell

to Fitzroy Crossing with her third husband Cowboy Dick; returning to Kunawarritji with her sisters at the dawn of the homelands movement. Although aged in her late seventies, Wompi maintained a highly transitory lifestyle, moving regularly between Kunawarritji, Balgo, Kiwirrkurra and Punmu in order to visit relatives and attend to familial obligations. Wompi's early works were largely produced through the Warlayirti Art Centre at Wirrimanu (Balgo). After 2010, Wompi increasingly worked through the newly formed Martumili Art Centre based in Newman. It was around this time that Wompi's work became increasingly abstract, as she worked alongside other senior artists Nora Nungabar and Bugai Whyoulter.

For Western Desert peoples, places are not understood in isolation, but rather through their intersections and connections. This reveals itself through the songlines that run across the country, uniting all places. These paths reflect the ancestral cosmology of the Dreaming, when spirit beings traveled across the landscape creating its sacred sites and leaving their residue in the landscape. For Indigenous people, this sacred essence remains in the landscape, and is discernible to those whose kinship or custodial ties allow them to access it.

It is this pervasive presence that Wompi explored in her paintings. In their sinuous pathways, we see an organic lattice of places, each connected, rolling into each other like tall or sandhills. Each gestural mark upon the canvas is like a footprint, revealing its creator's presence. Like a footprint, they exist as the memory of presence – a nostalgic echo of past travels, both personal and ancestral. Judith Ryan has characterized this as a "haptic

quality ... calling sites and spiritual associations through touch." This touch connected Wompi's knowledge and custodianship of the land to that of her ancestors; her movement on the canvas becomes a mythopoetic recollection of all the spiritual travels that underpin her country. At the same time, it overlays her own journey – both physical and artistic – creating a palimpsest that connects the past and present.

In doing so, Wompi's paintings create a matrix that unites all time and place. They paint the history of her landscape, as it is transcribed by ancient songlines and transgressed by more recent paths, such as the Canning Stock Route, which, during Wompi's lifetime, brought European settlers into the world of the Kukatja. These settlers could not see the landscape, access its sacred powers or read its songlines. But perhaps this is the very point of Wompi's paintings. As their lines of colour spill outwards to the edge of the painting, it is almost as though they are trying to break free of the canvas, to pour out from Kunawarritji to the world. As they reach the edge, they ask us to see the majesty outside the canvas – to realise that this mystical essence is part of the great continuum of existence. And so we stand before a final masterpiece. Conditioned as we are to hail individual genius, we might want to shout the artist's name: herald them with trumpets and fanfare. But the artist is gone. What is left is the earth: something greater and more enduring than human accolades. On canvas we are left a whispered trace of a genius loci that was and always will be, past-present-future, as Wompi becomes one with the ages.

Henry F. Skerritt is Curator of the Indigenous Arts of Australia at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia.



Suzanne O'Connell

MY WOMPI OBSESSION

I first discovered Nora Wompi's work upon my visit to the Warlayirti Art Centre in Western Australia, for a monumental on-site exhibition entitled Balgo 04/04, where amongst all the bedlam of obtaining stunning artworks and excitement of the chase by collectors and galleries alike, my eye was caught by a small, wild canvas, hanging in a side space, high up on a partition wall. I had an immediate attraction to the work. It spoke to me in the way in which, as I was soon to discover, the artist had intended: directly to my soul.

For a lot of one's work as an art dealer we focus so much on the name and provenance of an artist and their marketability. Which is fair enough as the arts is an industry. However, in this work we are blessed and I know I certainly was, to come across art which transcends the daily norm of art as business, which inspires and reminds us of why we are in such an industry. After my first encounter with a Wompi work I simply had to know more about the artist. I had to visit it again as I couldn't get the painting and its striking imagery out of my head. I went back to it and asked, "Who was it by?" and "What was it saying?". I was informed that it was a Nora Wompi work and that "she isn't here right now".

◀ LEFT
Nora Wompi & Suzanne, Kunawarritji, 2013
 Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists



As a dealer I was on the hunt, of course, for an artist I could promote from the and I had finally found that artist, someone with something to say and which the industry needed to know and about and hear what it was they had to say. Looking back, I don't believe it was just by chance that I happened across a Nora Wompi work. The friendship which ensued of the years following, I believe, was something fated.

Once home and back at my gallery I was planning a forthcoming exhibition schedule: there would be new work from Warlayirti, Women with Sticks, with Wompi included. Eventually I told the new team at Balgo I wanted to represent Wompi exclusively and show her as a contemporary artist in her own right, as an artist with a place in the schooled heights of the industry. To me she and her works could not be boxed solely as traditional Indigenous art, promoted to drooling buyers en masse hungry to get their hands on any and whatever kind of works fitted their perception of the world's oldest living culture. She was more important than that and her techniques were so refined they challenged the very best producers of mainstream contemporary works.

Soon enough Wompi called in to Warlayirti on a visit where she agreed on this trajectory and immediately set to work planning and producing artworks; such was her need to create and tell her stories. Suddenly the canvases she was painting were larger, and more resolved. Her use of colours had expanded and her blending sharpened, there were yellows, oranges and mingling blues and purples in these new works.

Another year passed and August 2007 approached which beckoned art month in Darwin, the time of the Telstra National

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Wompi had a piece in the finals and travelled up to Darwin and so I too made the pilgrimage.

Warlayirti's Sally Clifford introduced us- finally- in solemn fashion as gallerist to artist. We sat down together in traditional style, cross-legged on the parkland grass beside the Stuart Highway. "At last!" I said. Here we were, we said hello and I showed her pictures of her work from my exhibition. She was very pleased. She was in a nice bright desert dress, and wearing a cross around her neck, topped with her signature woollen beanie on her head. I was wearing something fabulous and tropical. We couldn't have appeared more different, I was very keen to make a good impression and all the while holding close to mind the fact that Wompi had never met a white person until in her teenage years. After engaging with her for some time I thought to myself, she is the real deal. I remember that first meeting to this day and revere it, I was in the presence of a true tribal woman, born in the bush and who made true art with no influences.

I knew the works and now I knew Wompi and I have always believed you never truly know the art until you know the artist. It's a reason I have endeavoured to have artists attend openings as much as possible. In saying that though, Wompi's works hold so much of her personality that one almost feels they know her already, through her work, prior to meeting her. Much like the artist, her art has a freedom of style had a freedom in its lines, its colours seemed to float, staying separate while also penetrating. There's certainly a cool quality about it. Not in a cold, museum-esque way, more like a chilly and inviting billabong.

Much of Wompi's works depicting desert topography, depicting the essence of a stretch of desert, not just the surface or mere appearance. Her works very much captured the spirit of the land. A land which seemed to come from a distant world. A world before white man which was Wompi's childhood country and in many ways her home as it is today.



Nora Wompi, Warlayirti Art Centre, Balgo Hills, 2012
Image courtesy of Warlayirti Artists

Nora Wompi, Darwin, 2007
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell



The pattern became clear at once. Much of the work sold, but it sold to a narrow range of buyers. Wompi's large, swirling, Wagnerian canvases weren't for everyone, but those who liked her found her art essential to them, they needed to have more than a single work. Soon there were entire houses in South-East Queensland festooned with little galleries of Wompi's art. State and national collections began to show interest. Thus, the name Nora Wompi had well and truly landed; her appeal was universal.

In 2010, I hired a large gallery space at Fortyfive Downstairs on Flinders Lane in Melbourne, and held a bravura Wompi solo show. Vast in size and overwhelmingly striking in colour, the works were on a scale beyond most desert artists. The swathes of colour she incorporated seemed more like abstracts than topographies, more like premonitions of some transformed future than readings of ancestral times. It's what the "arty farty" would call 'visionary'.

Together with the manager from Warlayirti, Wompi flew down for the launch. Wompi made a dramatic entry. She was slight yet elegant in a cerise-red jacket and purple top. There were welcomes, formal speeches, photos with the collecting elite. It seemed like a high point. But Wompi was still a puzzle. She was an artist who stood so strong alone, so expressionist she was beyond the well-established desert mainstream. And she was a puzzle for me too, I mean I knew her work could have an almost physical effect on people; I knew she was an engaged, life-loving woman but there was a lot I didn't know. After seeing her in the gallery in Melbourne with the art elite, it was clear that the time had come for me to go out to Wompi's country and see the Great Sandy Desert for myself. I was thrilled when Wompi invited me to come with her.

Nora Wompi, Melbourne, 2010
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell

Plans began to me formed, I made contact with Gabrielle Sullivan, the art centre manager at Martumili (servicing the artists in and around the Canning Stock Route) which is Wompi's country. There was much to discuss, about future plans. Wompi had just been chosen for the finals of the 2013 West Australian Indigenous Art Award- another breakthrough.

In 2013, Gabrielle suggested flying out to Well 33 by charter- the standard route for diehard enthusiasts. I wanted to experience the bush and see the country at ground level, take the long track by Troop Carrier from Newman out. I wanted to see more of the area and to see where the work had come from and the land which was depicted. I'd always wanted to know how it came alive, and seemed to move on the canvas; what gave her those loose brush-strokes and the flow; what the emblems and the symbols meant. Where it came from, now that's art's mystery. I really wanted to see for myself where Wompi was from, she had been to the big city and I wanted to go to her place. I wanted to spend some time with her at her home. I had already an idea of Kunawarritji in my mind beautiful yet barren place, dry waterholes, harsh in the day and full of life in the night. I need to see it for myself.

It was late-May when I reached the Pilbara. I met Gabrielle and the Martumili art centre team. After we convened we packed up our supplies, and off we drove on a long pull on rough dirt through Parrngurr, Punmu. We then ventured on, into nothingness, a half a day more, until the little rooves of Kunawarritji began to show.



Nora Wompi, Martumili Art Centre Newman, 2014
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists



Suzanne O'Connell, packed and ready for the journey, Newman, WA, 2013
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists



Nora Wompi, freshly dyed hair, Kunwarritji, 2013
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell



Watching Nora paint in the Artists Painting Shed, Kunwarritji, 2013
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists

We found Wompi at the aged care centre, along with her constant companions and fellow artists, Nora Nangapa and Bugai Whylouter, all three of them with their hair freshly dyed jet black. There were hugs, and kisses. After a tip off, I had brought well-chosen presents for this art star: new rosary beads and a handbag. The next day we all spent watching them create in the painting shed which was located a few metres from the centre. The excitement of witnessing Wompi and the other artists create their magic on canvas on country was one of those once in a lifetime experiences.

But what about the Well? All day I had kept hearing about this well and it sounded fabulous- especially for someone like me not used to the heat of the outback. The ladies were keen to show off their country and the well was only a short quarter-hour more, through sparse bush and low dunes. We got there in swift fashion as is the custom in the bush with open speed limit roads. Well 33, just off the ribbon of the Canning Stock Route, was very special indeed.

We stopped, and walked across the red dirt and the women were all pointing to places on the horizon, and speaking with great urgency. I could tell at once it was a place of great significance for them- as well as for me having been taken there by them, to this sacred place. I've been all over the world and seen some amazing sights and been some historic places, but this place, like no other, in its open expansiveness felt more like I had crossed a threshold into a dear friend's warm and inviting home. Well 33 will stay with me forever.



Suzanne and Wompi on location at Well 33, 2013
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists



I felt very comfortable there with Wompi and the other ladies. My time there was happy and I will always remember it with the utmost fondness. In traversing her country with her I got to see Wompi's most intimate relationship with her country. Because I'd been looking at the images in her work for so long, it cemented things for me, just being there, seeing where she comes from and how she is there. I could now say that I truly understood her work and where the beauty stemmed from. I came to realize it was a kind of magic, a magic in broad daylight.

Suzanne visits Nora Wompi at Aged Facility, Port Hedland, 2016
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell

A few short years later, in December 2016, I visited Port Hedland to arrange a Spinifix Hills exhibition with William Gardiner, I knew Nora was living at the Aged Care facility there. I couldn't pass up an opportunity to see my friend, who we had become such good friends with via correspondence in those years. Greg Taylor, manager of the Spinifix Hill Studio, kindly drove me to visit Wompi for what, sadly, was to be the last time. I didn't know this would be the last time, which meant our reunion was a joyous one, not a sad one. We were talking of the years to come of our friendship. My friend was thrilled to receive her favorite thing... a new set of rosary beads.



TWO WOMEN,
TWO CULTURES,
TWO LANGUAGES,
TWO WORLDS,
AS SEPARATE AS WORLDS COULD BE.....

Nora Wompi passed away at the facility the following year in December 2017. Fortunately, she was finally returned to and buried on her country near Kunawaratji earlier this year.

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#contains references from 'Colouring the Great Sandy Desert with the works of artist Nora Wompi' by Nicolas Rothwell, *The Australian*, July 20, 2013

◀ LEFT
Nora Wompi, Suzanne O'Connell, Newman, 2014
Image courtesy of Suzanne O'Connell



Dr Jacqueline Healy - Warlayirti Artists

NORA WOMPI: A GRAND VISION

The intricacies of Great Sandy Desert come alive in the art of Nora Wompi. Fluid brushstrokes render dreaming sites, talis, soak holes and bush tucker, creating visions of Kunawarritja reflecting intimate knowledge and spiritual connection to country. Nora Wompi's mastery of her art increased with her age as her work became increasingly confident. Larger canvases in her later years, like with the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Eubena Nampitjin and Sally Gabori, revealed the grandeur of her vision of telling the stories of her country.

The art and life of Nora Wompi is shaped by the intrusion of the Canning Stock Route on her traditional lands and way of life. Wompi comes from the generation of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley that grew up in the desert and came to the old Balgo mission with their families seeking refuge from starvation and exploitation.

Nora Wompi's life as an artist is intrinsically linked to Balgo and Warlayirti Artists.

It was a severe drought that forced her mother and brother to seek refuge at Balgo mission. She is connected through family to many of the other great artists of this region. Balgo was where Wompi met her husband, Dick Cowboy, the brother of Lucy Yukenbarri, in the early days of the art centre they painted together. She was also directly related to Eubena Nampitjin's first husband, Burugnu Tjakudu Tjapaltjarri Gimme, which made Eubena her aunty and Eubena's daughters her sisters. Nora and Eubena were good friends.

◀ LEFT: (Detail)
Kunawarritji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 160/12
180 x 120 cm



Kunawarritji, 2012
 acrylic on linen, 217/12
 100 x 150 cm

When Wompi returned to Balgo from Kunawarritja [Well 33] to paint at Warlayirti Artists, she would come to see her relatives and friends. Eric Zett (Arts Advisor 1999-2002) describes her relationship with Eubena. "While her close friend and countrywoman Eubena Nampitjin was undisputed High Priestess of the great Sandy Desert [or queen of the desert], Wompi was Venus to Eubena's moon (and skin daughter), a sparkle of charm wrapped in a small package, bursting with generous smiles."

The art centre at Balgo has a large painting room with a picture window looking towards the pound. It is a dazzling view of the escapement and immediately attracts visitors' attention. I have visited the art centre on several occasions while Wompi was painting there. Other senior women present sometimes included Elizabeth Nyumi, Eubena Nampitjin and Ningie Nanala. The painting room was usually filled with chatter and laughter. Periodically silence fell over the group as individual artists become engrossed in their paintings. These women talked about family and reminisced about their youth when they were together in the bush.

Annette Cock, Arts Advisor (2006-11) recalls when she arrived at the art centre; she immediately noticed the fluid painting style of Wompi. Wompi's work was included in a major exhibition *Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route* at the National Museum of Australia in 2009 and 2010, *Ingalimpa Tjunta-Singing Songs*, "We sing the country and that is how we find our way", in Tokyo. In 2011, the National Gallery of Victoria purchased several major canvases by Nora Wompi to join earlier works from the 1990s in their collection.

Wompi painted *Kunawarritji* [Well 33] on the Canning Stock route. She describes *Kunawarritji*, as "... a rock hole made in the Jukurpa. These Kanaput [Ancestral Dreams] are the stars in the sky. The Seven Sisters are standing in the sky between Nyipil [Well 34] and *Kunawarritji* [Well 33]. I was a little baby here at the rockholes of *Kunawarritji* and *Nyarruri* [Well 32]. I painted all the little hills around this area." Wompi was a Martu woman and the Seven Sisters or Minyipuru story is a key Jukurpa story. Her paintings conjured the physical features and spiritual meaning of landscape in a distinct style.



Kunawarritji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 159/12
180 x 120 cm

Stylistically Nora Wompi painted the sites of her country with great kinetic energy. Her vivacious personality is reflected in the vibrancy and diversity of her palette and her energised brush-strokes. Wompi's paintings are bold and confident. The talis (sand dunes) are shown with multiple thick lines. Soak holes are rendered with circles of colour. Occasionally small intricate dotting will appear conjuring up an earlier style. Mostly her work is about simplifying forms and refinement of colour. Sometimes pastel shades appear in her work offset with white. Other works detail an aspect of a story focussing on a few recurrent lines and circles that gain an enhanced visual power. Then lines of colour will be enveloped in white immersing the landscape in a mist.

Nora Wompi's arrived on foot to Balgo as a young woman. Later she was able to return to Kunawarritji to live. From the 1980s her art shared the story of her country, commencing with tight jewel like canvases that with age morphed into grand fluid masterpieces. Wompi's work marks her amongst the great artists of her generation.

Dr Jacqueline Healy is the Senior Curator, University of Melbourne

- i) Interview of Nora Wompi by Jane Gimme, Warlayirti Artists, April 2011.
- ii) *Yiwarra Kuju The Canning Stock Route*, National Museum of Australia Press, 2010,p.82.
- iii) Nora Wompi speaks Manyjilyjarra and Kukatja Language groups.



Kunawarritji, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 163/12
120 x 300 cm



Kunawarrtji Community, Well 33, 2010
 acrylic on linen, 184/10
 120 x 180 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
 acrylic on linen, 177/12
 100 x 50 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2013
acrylic on canvas, 36/13
120 x 180 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 177/12
180 x 120 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2010
acrylic on linen, 54/10
180 x 150 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 154/12
150 x 100 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2009
acrylic on linen, 314/09
90 x 60 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 241/12
100 x 50 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 102/12
150 x 100 cm



Kunawarrtji, 2012
 acrylic on linen, 216/12
 120 x 180 cm



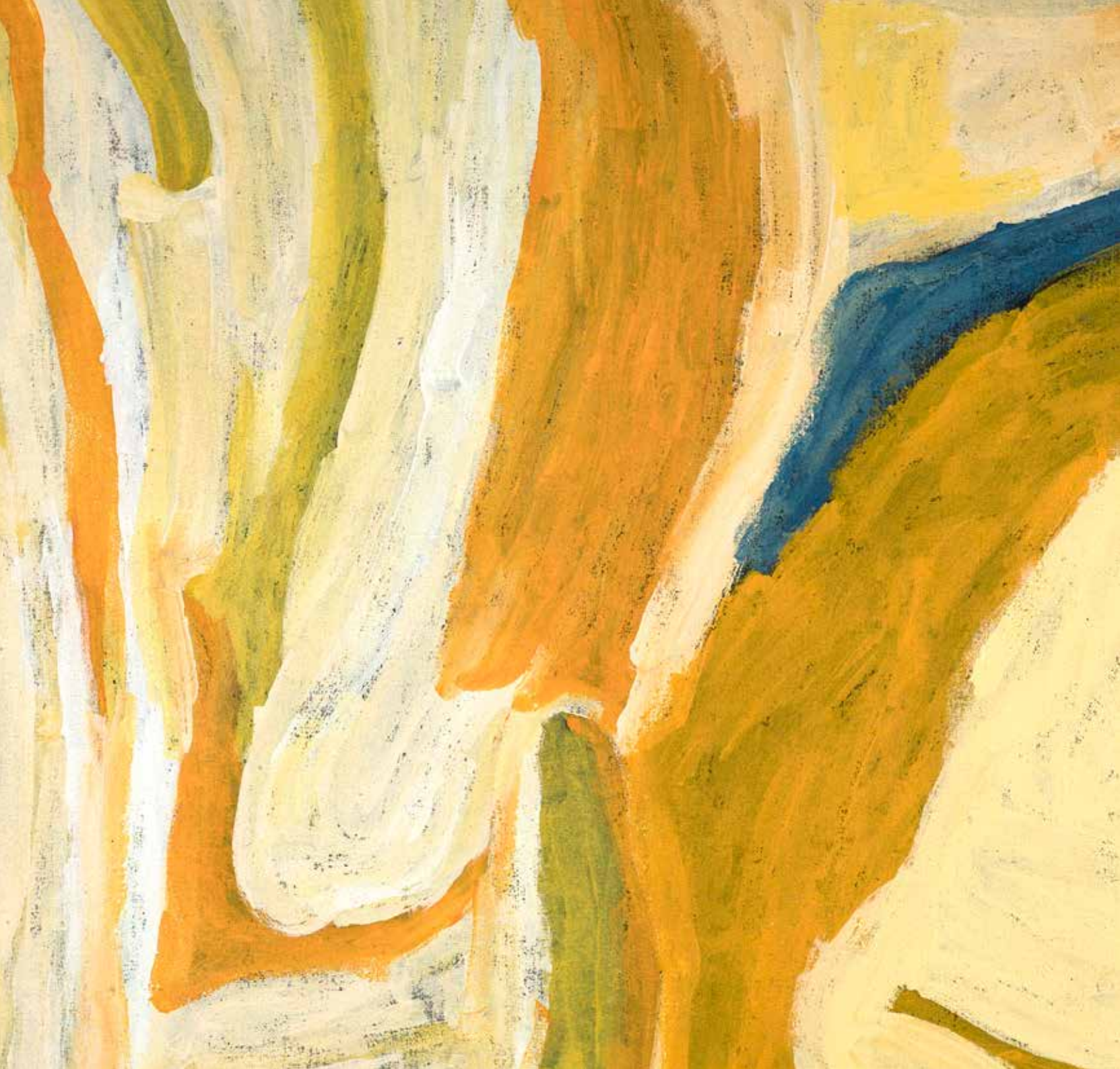
Kunawarrtji, 2010
 acrylic on linen, 55/10
 150 x 180 cm



Kunawarritji, 2012
 acrylic on linen, 105/12
 120 x 180 cm



Nyipil, 2012
 acrylic on linen, 56/12
 150 x 180 cm



Gabrielle Sullivan

MARTUMILI: NORA WOMPI

*'I used to cry for my mother, but my brother would carry me,
leave me in the shade and wet my hair...'*

Nora Wompi was born with 'pussycat' (feral cat) Dreaming at Pingakurangu rockhole near Kunawarritji. As a teenager, she travelled north with the drovers to Billiluna and Balgo. Wompi spent her final years painting on her Country at Kunawarritji. She lived there with her son Mr Bell and her daughter in law Bugai Whyoulter and her sister Nora Nungabar. The three of them painted together at 33 for the last twelve years or so.

When I first meant Wompi in about 2003 I knew her as a weaver of beautiful baskets, she was sitting outside her home at Kunawarritji with Nora Nungabar, Bugai Whyoulter and Dulcie Gibbs. The four women were weaving beautiful coloured baskets made from Minarri grass and brightly coloured wool. This was a few years before Martumili Artists existed as an art centre but Wompi was already painting with Warlayirti Artists at Balgo when she would go to visit family.

◀ LEFT: (Detail)
Untitled, 2011
acrylic on linen, 11/1241
91 x 152 cm



Yurunkurmpa, 2010
acrylic on linen, 10/1185
117 x 140 cm

By the time Martumili Artists was up and running in 2007, Wompi was living at 33 (common name for Kunawarritji which is located at Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route) most of the time, but still going to Balgo to visit family where she would also paint.

Wompi painted and painted and painted, she painted with Nungabar, Bugai, Dulcie (dec), Marjorie (dec) and all the kids at 33, with frequent visits from Jakayu Biljabu and Kumpaya Girgirba.

As the art centre (Martumili) evolved so did the proliferation of collaborative paintings. Martu always paint collaboratively with Maripa (company), rarely is it a solo pursuit.

The women in particular started working on canvases together. Wompi, Nungabar and Bugai were quite competitive for real-estate on the canvas during the creation of collaborative works. The experience was joyous, endless hours of singing and storytelling interspersed with a drive out to the well, (Canning Stock Route Well 33) to call out to the Jila (snake), show the kids and frequently the many tourists the Country that was theirs.

The painting was the biproduct of being in Country and sharing it with other people, the painting didn't come first or last it was part of the cycle of singing, teaching, dancing, sharing.

I know this is a catalogue about Wompi as an artist but she wasn't an artist above anything else, she was a person who cared for Country, she was a member of the Western Desert Community, she was a senior respected elder and cultural leader, painting was just one of the many ways she expressed all of that.

Wompi loved her dogs, I know most senior artists in the desert love their dogs but Wompi took it to another level, the dogs at her camp were gorgeous happy well fed and loved puppy's. You were one lucky puppy if Wompi looked after you!

I took Wompi, Nungabar and Bugai to Perth in 2013. Wompi was a finalist in the WA Indigenous Art Award that year, to coincide with the awards Wompi, Nungabar and Bugai had their own exhibition at the Fremantle Art Centre the exhibition was titled "33". For Wompi and Nungabar this was the last trip away to the city to see their work in an exhibition. There was great pride in seeing her work exhibited along with the financial benefits she was able to share from artwork sales with her family.



Pangkapirni, Kinyu, Yaturti, My Country, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/402
76 x 152 cm

For those fortunate to have her work hanging on their wall I hope they know what a significant possession they hold. Wompi's artworks captured a moment in time when she expressed her intrinsic knowledge of Country, culture and colour theory to create something beautiful. Wompi passed away in Port Hedland in an Aged Care Facility in late 2017, she was there with other family. She wasn't in an aged care facility for very long, prior to needing full time care she continued to live at home in Kunawarritji and she painted until she left.

She left behind family and friends and a legacy for other Martu women who continue to paint, who were learnt by her.

I know you are probably looking for romantic text about an extraordinary artist but my memories of her are of a woman who lived at Kunawarritji with her family and someone who was always kind and generous to me and all the other non-Martu people she worked with at the art centre. My memories are of arriving at 33, frequently well into the night and upon arrival I would drive to Wompi's camp, she would be outside by the fire with the dogs and if she wasn't there she'd be sitting on a small sand dune behind the house, watching.

Kunawarritji is the Martu community furthest east from the WA side, the next community along is Kwirikurra. It is a long way to drive there from most places if it is not your home, but it is in the middle of somewhere and that somewhere is the inspiration for some of the greatest paintings.

Wompi was a straightforward efficient artist, she never laboured over her painting, the paintings were an extension her, she painted a lot, she had a lot to give.

Gabrielle Sullivan was the Arts and Business Manager for Martumili Artists. (2007 - 2015)



Big Tuwwa at Phillip Bell's birthplace at Ngara Apal Bolgo Kakarra, 2015
acrylic on linen, 15/679
125 x 300 cm



Untitled, 2013
acrylic on linen, 13/792
76 x 152 cm



Kunawarriti Ngurra, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/406
91 x 91 cm



Untitled, 2011
acrylic on linen, 11/1241
91 x 152 cm



Kunawarritji Ngurra, 2014
acrylic on linen, 14/371
91 x 91 cm



Untitled, 2015
acrylic on linen, 15/973
91 x 122 cm



Kunawarritji Ngurra, 2014
acrylic on linen, 14/60
122 x 76 cm



Marrla Malu, 2013
acrylic on linen, 13/275
76 x 122 cm



Untitled, 2013
acrylic on linen, 13/555
76 x 61 cm



Kunawarritji Ngurra, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/404
76 x 122 cm



Kunawarritji Ngurra, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/1308
61 x 46 cm



Kunawarritji, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/754
91 x 61 cm



Lipuru, 2011
acrylic on linen, 11/1324
61 x 91 cm



Untitled, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/412
122 x 76 cm



Untitled, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/782
76 x 122 cm



Yurti, 2011
acrylic on linen, 11/554
152 x 76 cm



Untitled, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/793
91 x 122 cm



Nyipil, 2014
acrylic on canvas, 14/733
122 x 76 cm

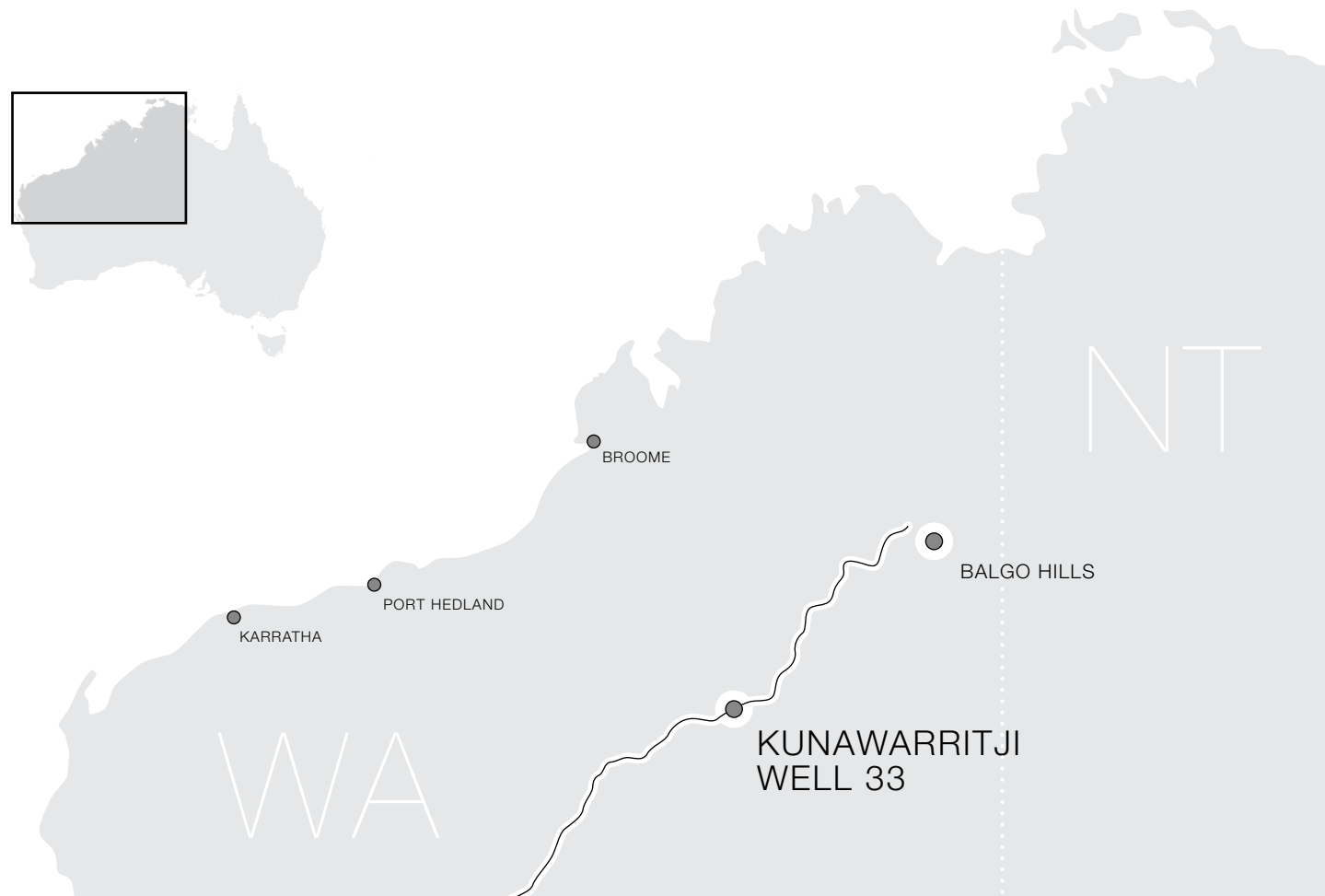


Untitled, 2012
acrylic on linen, 12/863
122 x 76 cm



Panjarri-Jila, 2013
acrylic on linen, 13/997
150 x 150 cm

Biography - Warlayirti Artists



Nora Wompi (circ. 1934)

Born: Circ. 1934

Location: Lilparu

Skin: Nungurrayi

Language: Kukatja

Representation: Suzanne O'Connell Gallery Brisbane

Mediums: Professional acrylic on canvas and linen

Themes: Kunnawarritji (natural spring)

Seven Sisters story

Wana (digging stick)

Kamput (bush tomato)

Kantilli (bush raisin)

Wompi was born in the Great Sandy Desert in a place called Lilparu, which is close to Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route. Here she lived a traditional nomadic life until her early twenties. Wompi recalls it was near Well 33 that she saw a white person for the first time. Nomadic life was harsh during dry times and she tells of the long walk into the Balgo Mission with her mother and brother. In Balgo she cooked bread at the bakery and tended to the goats. This is also where she met her husband, the brother to fellow artist Lucy Yukenbarri. Wompi and her husband, Dick Cowboy would paint together as is common with husband and wives in Balgo. They spent some time in Fitzroy Crossing until her husband passed away. Wompi then decided to return to Well 33 where she continues to reside today. However, she visits Balgo regularly to see family and to paint. Her work oscillates between intricate tracings of familiar country and painterly strokes of bold colour, stories of spirit men, spirit dogs and love magic reverberate in the paintings full of charm and beauty.

Solo Exhibitions

- 2012 Nora Wompi at Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne.
(Suzanne O’Connell Gallery)
- 2011 Nora Wompi, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery at The Depot, Sydney.
- 2010 Nora Wompi, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery at fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne.
- 2009 Nora Wompi, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane
- 2008 Nora Wompi, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane
- 2002 Nora Wompi, Raft Artspace, Darwin

Group Exhibitions

- 2018 Parcours des Mondes, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Paris, France
- 2017 Art Elysées, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Paris, France
- 2016 L’art australien à Monaco, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Novotel, Monaco, L’empreinte de l’art. Peintures, gravures et sculptures des Aborigènes d’Australie. Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob in association with Thomas Martin, Lyon, France
- 2015 Au cœur de l’art aborigène australien, Société Générale Private Banking/ Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Monaco
- 2014 Mémoires Vives. Une Histoire de l’Art Aborigène, Musée d’Aquitaine, Bordeaux, France
- 2013 Art Paris, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Paris, France
- 2012 Art Gent, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Gand, Belgique, Belgium, Art Elysées, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Paris, France, Parcours des Mondes, Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Paris, France
- 2012 Warlayirti Artists, Artkelch Pro Community, Freiburg, Grassi Museum Leipzig, Fabrik Der Kunste, Hamburg and Galerie Gunzoburg Bodensee (Lake Constance), Germany
- 2011 Galerie AROA & Arts d’Australie, Stéphane Jacob, Neuilly sur Seine, France
- 2011 Nora and Nora, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane
- 2011 Desert Mob, Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs, NT

- 2011 Balgo – 2011, Redot Gallery, Singapore
- 2011 Kunnawamitj Tjukurpa: Wirrimanu ga Nyinin, Short St Gallery Broome
- 2011 Nora Wompi and Nora Nganapa, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, New Farm Qld
- 2010 Balgo Survey, Rheinfelden/Baden, Haus Salmegg, Colamon Aboriginal Art Gallery Schopfheim, Germany
- 2010 Balgo Survey, ReDot Gallery, Singapore
- 2010 Mixed exhibition, Palya Art, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth
- 2010 “Ingalimpa Tjuntu” - Singing Songs “We sing the country & that’s how we find the way”, ReDot Fine Art Galleries, Audi Forum Building, Tokyo
- 2010 Desert Mob, Araluen Centre, Alice Springs, NT
- 2009 Survey Balgo, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2009 Desert Mob, Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs
- 2008 Short Street Gallery, Group Show, Broome
- 2008 Balgo Survey, Redot Gallery, Singapore
- 2007 Mixed show, Palya Art, Melbourne, Sydney Perth
- 2007 ‘Women With Sticks’, Suzanne O’Connell, Brisbane
- 2007 Survey, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2007 Survey, They Might be Giants, Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane
- 2006 Recent Works, Short Street Gallery, Broome
- 2006 Balgo 2005, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2006 Singing and Dancing up the Country, Raft Gallery, Darwin
- 2005 Balgo 2005, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne
- 2004 Desert Mob, Araluen Centre for Arts, Alice Springs
- 2004 Balgo a Go Go, Grantpirrie, Sydney
- 2004 Balgo 4-04, Warlayirti Artists, Balgo
- 2003 Eight by Three, Scott Livesey Art Dealer, Melbourne
- 2003 Balgo Prints, Northern Editions, Darwin
- 2002 Art from Balgo, Gallery Gondwana, Alice Springs

Collections

- National Gallery of Victoria
- Art Gallery of New South Wales
- Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland
- National Gallery of Victoria
- National Museum of Australia
- Araluen Arts Centre Collection
- The Edward Rowden White Collection, Trinity College, University of Melbourne
- The Laverty Collection, Sydney
- Helen Read Collection
- HBL Collection, Melbourne
- Griffith University Art Collection, Brisbane

Awards

- 2011 Nominee NATSIAA, Museum and Art Gallery of NT, Darwin
- 2008 35th Alice Prize, Selected Nominee, Araluen, Alice Springs
- 2007 Nominee, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art Awards (Telstra), Art Gallery and Museum of Northern Territory.

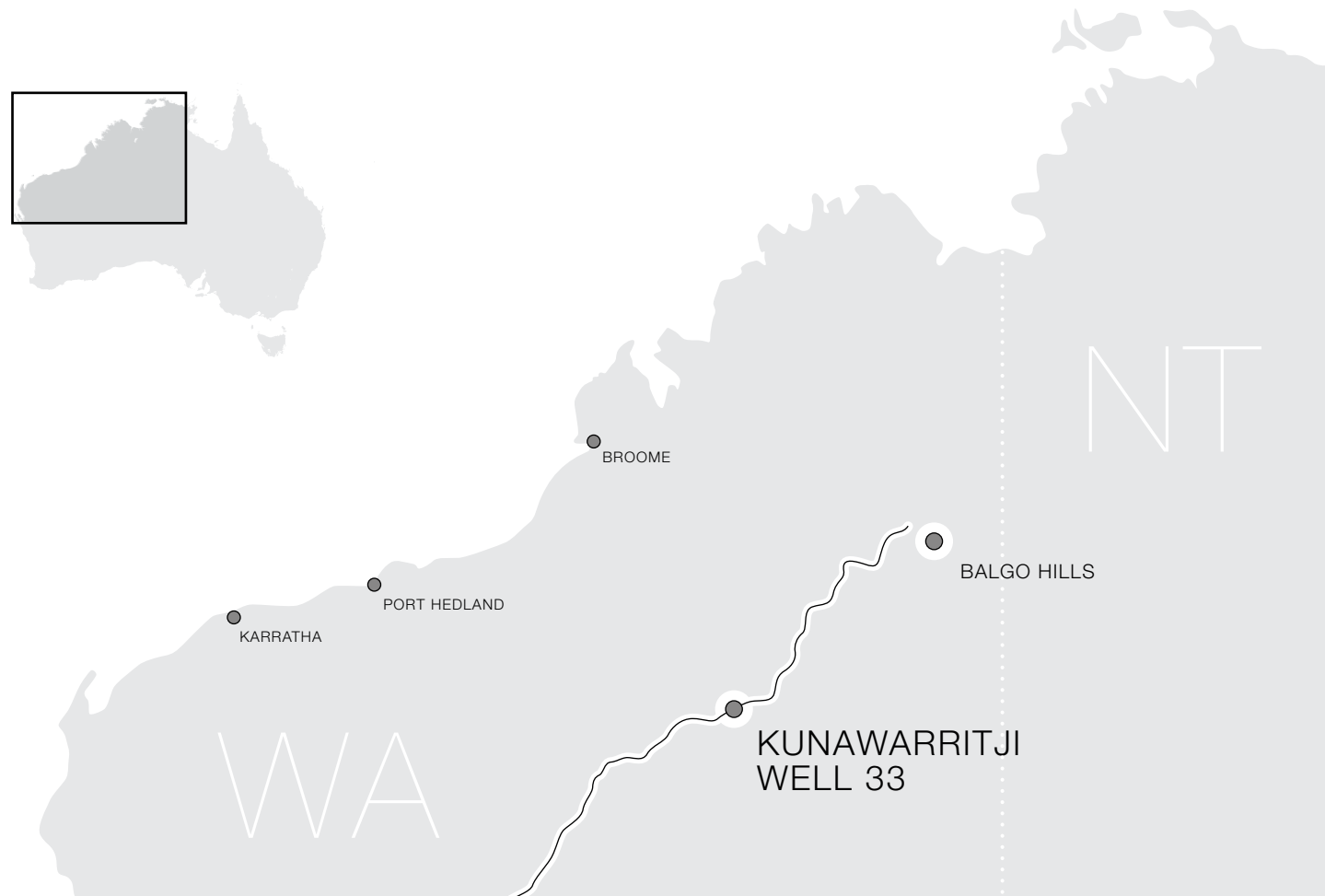
Publications

- 2012 ‘Indigenous Art Centres in Australia’, Australian Art Collectors, April-June 2012. Pg. 164-167.
- 2011 ‘NAATSIA’S Pick of the Crop-Nora Wompi’, Australian Art Collector, Oct –Dec 2011. Pg. 116-119
- 2011 ‘Suzanne O’Connell Gallery’, Australian Art Review, Jul-Augusts 2011 pg. 61-64

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- Peter, S. & Lofts, P., (eds) (1997) Yarrtji Six women’s stories from the Great Sandy Desert, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra
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- Suzanne O’Connell Gallery (2007) Women with Sticks, Exhibition Catalogue, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane.
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- Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, (2009) Nora Wompi Solo Exhibition, Exhibition Catalogue, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane.
- Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, (2010) Nora Wompi at fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne Exhibition Catalogue, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane.
- Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, (2011) Nora Wompi at the Depot Gallery, Sydney Exhibition Catalogue, Suzanne O’Connell Gallery, Brisbane.
- Watson, C., (2007) ‘Wirrimanu: Meeting Place’ One Sun One Moon Aboriginal Art in Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Watson, C., (2003) Piercing the Ground Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Freemantle.
- Watson, C., (1999) ‘Touching the Land: Towards an aesthetic of Balgo contemporary painting’ Art from the Land, University of Virginia, Charlottesville
- Williamson, S & Togni, S (eds) Eubena Nampitjin Art and Life, Warlayirti Artists Aboriginal Corporation, Balgo Hills.

Biography - Martumili Artists



Nora Wompi (circ. 1934)

Born: Circ. 1934

Location: Kunawarritji : WA

Skin: Karimarra

Language: Kukatja

Birthplace: Lilparu , close to Well 33, WA

Representation: Suzanne O'Connell Gallery Brisbane

Mediums: Professional acrylic on canvas and linen

Themes: Bilup
Kinyu
Kudujirri
Kunawarritji
Moyojulu
Papul
Warna,
Wartaparni
Yarny

Nora Wompi was born in the Great Sandy Desert in Lilparu, close to Well 33, on the Canning Stock Route. She grew up in the desert, primarily to the north and east of Punmu and Kunawarritji communities. When she was young, her parents often went hunting and left her in the care of her older brother.

Wompi remembers him as a good brother, who carried her to the shade, and brought her cool water; "I used to cry for my mother, but my brother would carry me, leave me in the shade and wet my hair..."

She stayed with her family until she was able to hunt for herself, but eventually decided in her early twenties that she, like many of her relatives, would leave the desert. Nomadic life was harsh, and even more so during the prolonged and severe drought in the Western Desert during the 1960's.

Wompi travelled north through Kulikujara, Puntilyarr, Walayurtu, Pankam, Jintijinti and Mayililyi before reaching Billiluna. She lived at Balgo Mission with her mother and brother, where she worked at the bakery and tended to goats. Wompi met her husband at Balgo mission, and together they travelled to Fitzroy Crossing, where she lived with him until his death. Wompi then returned to Kunawarritji to be with her close relatives.

Wompi was a prolific painter and evocative storyteller, with deep knowledge about the country surrounding her home at Kunawarritji. For many years she painted alongside her great friend and contemporary Nora Nungabar with both Martumili and Warlayir Artists.

Solo Exhibitions

2013 Pirkijarra (My Mother), Suzanne O'Connell Gallery, New Farm, Brisbane, QLD

Group Exhibitions

2018 Martuku Ninti (Martu Knowledge), Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, VIC

2018 Pujiman, Martumili Artists and Spinifex Hill Artists, Port Hedland Courthouse Gallery

2018 Voice of the custodians of the Homeland: Martumili, Aboriginal Signature Estrangin Gallery, Bruxelles

2017 Art at the Heart, Martumili Gallery, Newman, WA

2017 After The Rains, Martumili Gallery, Newman, WA

2017 Women of Martu, Suzanne O'Connell Gallery, Brisbane, QLD

2016 Scratching the Surface, Alliance Francaise de Sydney, Sydney, NSW

2016 Pirkijarra (My mother), Suzanne O'Connell Gallery, New Farm, Brisbane, QLD

2016 Summer Salon and Art Parade

2015 Palya, Martumili Artists, Tjarlirli Art and Warakurna Artists, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Brightspace

2015 Leading Ladies, Suzanne O'Connell Gallery, New Farm, QLD

2015 Tarnanthi, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, SA

2015 Desert Mob, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, NT

2015 Martumili Artists, Paul Johnstone Gallery, Darwin, NT

2015 Pukurlpa - Good Inside, Yaama Ganu Gallery, Moree, NSW

2015 Together as One Martu - Art from the far Western Desert, The Gallery Shop, Waverley, NSW

2015 A Time and a Place: Landscapes from the Griffith University Art Collection, Griffith University Art Gallery, South Bank, QLD

2015 The Summer Collectors Show 2015, McCulloch & McCulluch Gallery, Mornington Peninsula, VIC

2014 Martu Art From the Western Desert, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, NSW

2014 Desert Mob, Araluen Centre, Alice Springs, NT

2014 Right Now, Boomalli Gallery, Leichardt, Vic

2013 33 Wompi Bugai Nungabar, Fremantle Art Centre, Fremantle, WA

2013 Salon des Refuses, Paul Johnstone Gallery, Darwin

2013 Painting It Martu Way, Art Mob, Hobart

2013 Selected works by the Martumili Artists, Raft Artspace, Alice Springs

2013 The Great Sandy Desert, Yaama Ganu Gallery, Moree

2012 We Don't Need A Map: a Martu experience of the Western Desert

2012 Deserts & Rivers, FORM Gallery, Perth

2012 Martumili Artists 2012, Merenda Gallery, Perth

2012 Desert Mob, Araluen Centre, Alice Springs

2012 Warla: an explanation of the salt lakes in the Great Sandy Desert, Short Street Gallery, Broome

2012 Decrochage de l'exposition des Martumili Artists, Galerie Kungka, France

2012 Martumili Artists Recent Works, William Mora Gallery, Melbourne

2011 Living Water – Contemporary Art of the Far Western Desert, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Group Exhibitions cont.

2011 Green, Outstation, Darwin

2011 Waru! Holding Fire in Australia's Western Desert, Thomas Welton Stanford Art Gallery, Stanford, University, San Francisco

2011 Yiwarra Kuju – One Road, One People, Perth Convention Exhibition Centre, Perth

2011 Yiwarra Kuju – One Road, One People, Australian Museum, Sydney

2010 Jakulpa laju kartyinpa (Bringing a message), Chapman Gallery, Canberra

2010 Hedland Art Award, Courthouse Gallery, Port Hedland

2010 Edge of the Lake, Short Street Gallery, Broome

2010 Yiwarra Kuju – One Road, One People, National Museum of Australia, Canberra

2010 Martumili Group Exhibition, Redot Art Gallery, Singapore

2010 Martumili Group Exhibition, AP Bond Gallery, Adelaide

2009 Wangka-Lampaju (Our Story), Randell Lane Gallery, Perth

2009 Yankuni laju karkani kujungka (We are travelling together by air), Red Dot Gallery, Singapore

2008 Martumili Artists Recent Works, William Mora Galleries, Melbourne

2008 Laltu tujuparaku, yulpalpa yirnaparaku (Lots of women, little bit men), Aboriginal and Pacific Art, Sydney

2008 Ngurra waltja wakarni (We are painting country), Short St Gallery, Broome

2008 Martumili Artists, Port Hedland Courthouse Arts Centre and Gallery, Port Hedland

Collections

National Museum of Australia

Awards

2013 Finalist, Western Australian Indigenous Art Award

2013 Finalist, Glencore Art Centre Award

2012 Finalist, Hedland Art Award

Contributors

Henry F. Skerritt is the Mellon Curator of the Indigenous Arts of Australia at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia. He has written extensively on Australian art, including contributions to catalogue publications for the National Museum of Australia, Harvard Art Museums, and the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College. Skerritt holds a Ph.D in art history from the University of Pittsburgh and as Masters in Art Curatorship from the University of Melbourne.

Gabrielle Sullivan was the inaugural Manager at Martumili Artists establishing the art centre with the artists from the Martu communities of the East Pilbara. Gabrielle has also worked with the WA Department of Culture and the Arts as the Pilbara Arts Development Officer and later with the former Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs where she was based in Port Hedland. Gabrielle is currently the CEO of the Indigenous Art Code Limited.

Suzanne O'Connell has been a daring champion of the most innovative contemporary artists for now close to two decades presenting a dynamic exhibition program of the highest calibre covering a diverse range of mediums. While working nationally and internationally to promote the great depth and diversity of Australian indigenous artistic talent, Suzanne has spearheaded new and innovative avenues for the promotion of Indigenous art abroad.

Dr Jacqueline Healy PhD, MBA, BA (Hons) is the senior curator of the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne. She has visited Balgo annually since 2000. Awarded her PhD in 2006 on marketing art from Balgo and Warmun and curated Warlayirti: The Art of Balgo in 2014.

All paintings are accompanied with Warlayirti Artists or Martumili Artists certificates of authenticity.

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Nora Wompi, Kunawarritji, 2008
Image courtesy of Gabrielle Sullivan, Martumili Artists

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