

SONGLINES

Kungkarangkalpa: the Seven Sisters Songline performance that happened in Canberra at the opening weekend of the C100 festivities in 2013, is part of a wider project that celebrates the Dreaming tracks of the Western Desert. Tony Collins watched it from a thousand kilometers away on a live internet stream but as a project manager with one of the production partners, Ananguku Arts, he was close to the action. This article was published in Art Monthly in May 2013.



Tapaya Edwards is Wati Nyiru in Kungkarangkalpa: Seven Sisters Songline (Photo: Iain Morton)

When seven bare breasted women and a near naked man started dancing around a fire on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin on a cold autumn night, the people who'd come to watch were ready to be transported. This wasn't just a celebration of a hundred year old town plan, it was a bold journey into post-colonial story telling which would take its audience to the stars and back.

The people of Canberra had crammed themselves into an amphitheatre in the grounds of the National Museum of Australia facing a makeshift dance ground of red desert earth. A cascading wall of light panels skirted the red dirt coming alive with panoramic visions of the country where this story from the beginning of time is located.

It's so fitting that the Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurrpa should arrive now at the National Capital. This lustful tale of obsession and treachery runs through the very heart of the nation, quite literally, and the moral dilemmas faced by all parties along its route are the age old ones that dwell in the souls of all humanity.

The broader project, *Alive with the Dreaming! Songlines of the Western Desert*, is a brave attempt by the artists of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands to spear the psyche of the Australian mainstream with a taste of real story telling from the land. "These big creation stories for this country, for this land, are very important for everybody to listen to and to understand," says Inawinytji Williamson, one of the women instrumental in creating the performance for C100.

The dance, accompanied by a live chorus of singers, all senior women connected to the songline, was faithfully reconstructed from ceremony that depicts the journey of the seven sisters as they are pursued by the powerful Wati Nyiru, eventually flying up into the sky where they become stars. But here, in the festival context, the artists collaborated with acclaimed director Wesley Enoch to produce a stunning piece of theatre that brings this Dreaming story to life in a way that has never been seen before. Project Coordinator Dr Diana James from the Australian National University said that both performers and audience reported "a deeply and powerfully emotional experience."



Projected images transported the audience to the APY Lands (Photo: Iain Morton)

While the digital aspects of the project bring video, photography and soundscape to the storytelling, the revitalisation of the songline has spurred an upsurge in the production of paintings related to the Seven Sisters Tjukurpa and the Ngintaka (Perentie Man) story. "Already we've seen a huge burst of activity in the art centres painting around these two songlines and particularly at Tjala Arts, some fabulous collaborative work where the older custodians of this knowledge have been working with their daughters or their granddaughters or the men with their sons, actually teaching them by working together on collaborative works of art," said Dr James.

Margo Neale, the NMA's Senior Indigenous Curator on the Songlines Project, says the Museum has embraced a very different approach to the project which will culminate in 2016 with a major exhibition of art works and artifacts relating to the Seven Sisters story. "The whole project is tracking the Seven Sisters songline, archeologically, ecologically, visually and performatively, and so all those aspects will be reflected in the works and the accompanying text and multi-media," she said.

The Seven Sisters is a story that is truly pervasive. Lying in a swag in a dry creek bed at Balfour Well near Ernabella during the rehearsal camp for this Inma, I gazed up at one of the few constellations that can be seen from both the northern and southern hemispheres. Neale tells me they have Seven Sisters stories in Ireland and Japan and in virtually every Aboriginal language group across Australia from Hindmarsh Island to the Bundjalung nation, from Yirrkala to Ceduna. "The context of the story varies from place to place but the story of the Seven Sisters and its relationship to Orion and Pleiades seems to be universal," she says. "Even here in Canberra where the variation is about the ice maiden."



Screen titles assisted the audience in understanding the narrative (Photo: Iain Morton)

In an essay for the *Ananguku Arts* exhibition *Tjukurpa Pulkatjara*, the NGV's Indigenous Curator Judith Ryan described the *Kungkarangkalpa* story as "an enticing, cheeky and provocative narrative about sex, sexual opportunity, voyeurism and sexual avoidance which comes alive and takes on a different guise every time it is sung, danced and painted, sensed in country or witnessed in the night skies."⁽¹⁾

1. Ryan, J, *Tjukurrpa pulkatjara the power of the law*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 2010, p. 7.

Tucked in my swag staring straight up at it, I'm struggling to lose the image of the Saucepan and reimagine this constellation as the footprint of the shape shifting sorcerer Wati Nyiru, tracking the Sisters into the cosmos. Here in the desert country east of Ernabella the Tjukurpa tells of a great journey across the APY Lands up into Western Australia. The Sisters are followed by Nyiru who obsessively watches them wanting to take one for a wife. He transforms into a tree whose fruit the Sisters eat. He fools them by becoming a serpent on the ground but at each turn the older Sisters discovers his tricks and they outsmart him.

"It's a morality tale akin to classical tales from other cultures," says Neale, "which seem to be about destroying that which you most desire, it's always about someone lusting after something they are not entitled to, in this case a lustful man. He breaks the law and tries to enter a wrong way relationship and the punishment is danger and death."

A return performance of Kungkarangalpa is planned for Canberra in 2016 with the Seven Sisters visual art exhibition at the NMA. Neale says it's not being curated in the normal way. "We're collecting works along the songline in the same way that the whole project is about tracking the Seven Sisters Songline through all of the different sites across three deserts from Newman eastward to the APY lands," she said.

Recent acquisitions by the NMA include paintings by Tjungu Palya artists Wingu Tingima, who was a senior custodian of the stories around Kuru Ala and her granddaughter Sallyanne Roberts. Neale says it's the relationship between the two artists that's important. "You've got an older and a younger female, both with different levels of access to the Kuru Ala stories and you can see the similarities and the passing on of the knowledge and the information." Neale says the older artist's work is a much more assured, bigger and more confident painting whereas the younger artist is more figurative, displaying a clear narrative. "It's this sort of relationship between people and the levels of access to the site and levels of access to the stories that shows the cultural intent of this Tjukurpa," she said.

Another recent acquisition is by Alison Munti Riley who paints with Tjala Arts. Neale says she was attracted to the strong narrative qualities and figuration in her work. "It has this little figure that we think is Wati Nyiru and you very rarely see him pictured. You'll see a foot with four toes or various things like that but people tell us this is an actual depiction of Wati Nyiru and you can see the spears and the footprints of the chase and other impliments," she said.

At the other end of the songline in Martu country in Western Australia the sisters are known as Minyipuru and the old man's name is Yurla. A work acquired by the NMA as part of the Canning Stock Route collection represents another part of the Seven Sisters story. Three sisters, painting together for the first time, produced a collaborative work of such strong resonance that it sparked a trend among Martu artists to paint collaboratively. Martumili Artists Manager Gabrielle Sullivan says it was "the authority of these women and the fact that they were breaking new ground that made it OK for other artists to paint these stories." She says the Martu

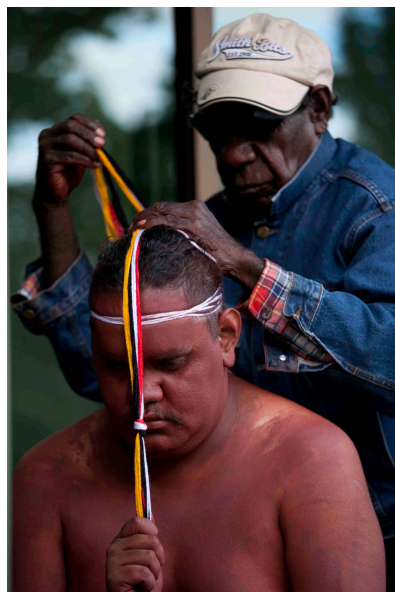
are culturally very conservative and for a long time they were concerned about the painting movements at Kintore and Kiwikurra and in Balgo, all close neighbours, where they sensed that artists were exposing restricted information to those who should not have access to it. "After a lot of discussion and time," says Sullivan, "they decided that painting was a good way to ensure stories and culture were passed onto younger generations and shared with the community, Martu and non-Martu."

The three sisters, Rita Simpson, Rosie Williams and Dulcie Gibbs, are painting the story of the Minyipuru, one of the most important Jukurrpa stories for Martu women. The old man is pursuing the sisters and captures one of them at Pangkapini, a site between two wells on the stock route. According to the exhibition catalogue,

The Minyipuru promised to stay with the old man Yurla but, when he returned from collecting wood, they were floating above his head, teasing him. Yurla made a ladder but the sisters pushed it over and laughed at him. When he collapsed, exhausted, they rescued their sister and flew away.

Sullivan was sitting in the dirt with the women not far from the site they were depicting when they painted this work. "It was an important moment for Martu women," she says. "Since then, it's been painted a lot more."

The stories depicted in the paintings and the dances are specific to each site along the songline and as the journey of the sisters progresses even the painted designs on the bodies of the dancers change. "When people dance for a particular place you'll see they always use the same special design from the Tjukurpa that indicates the place that they're dancing for," says Inawinytji Williamson. "You can see them in the rock art around these sites," she said.



Senior Traditional Owner Witchety George prepares Tapaya Edwards for the performance (Photo: Iain Morton)

Diana James has been working with Pitjantjatjara elders for decades creating films and audio CD's of the public aspects of the Tjukurpa both as a method of handing on the stories to the next generation and as a way of sharing the traditions of the country. "It's not everybody's aim, you know there has been criticism of the project from some elements who say that this material just belongs to Anangu and should stay with them but the majority of the people we're working with and the people who've pushed for this project to happen, the forerunners of this project, Nganyinytja Ilyajari, Andy Tjilari and the others who worked for years teaching and telling this story to wider audiences, they really want to communicate the importance of these Songlines for all Australians.

"They don't want to trespass or go against their own protocols. There is secret sacred knowledge that will not be shared through this project and there is no intention to even record or delve into that area," Dr James said.

Inawinytji Williamson says Anangu are passionate about sharing the open story: "All the old people, the senior traditional owners for this song who are now living at Pukatja aged care told me they are really happy for me to take this story to Canberra," Williamson said.

James says that the Kungkarangkalpa Exhibition at the NMA in 2016 and the Ngintaka Exhibition scheduled for 2014 at the Museum of South Australia aim to create immersive environments that will give viewers a powerful experience of the Dreaming stories. Each will combine performance works and a range of innovative digital content with an exhibition of the highest quality paintings and sculptural works from leading and emerging artists.

David Miller, an artist and Chair of Anangu Arts and Culture, one of the main drivers of the project, says *Alive with the Dreaming! Songlines of the Western Desert* is the way forward for keeping Anangu culture alive. "We want to share the way we appreciate the land and the stories and songs about our country and this way we can involve our young people in taking our stories to the wider public," he said.



The audience was enthralled at the C100 performance (Photo: Iain Morton)