Contemporary Australian Art

from the Balgo Hills
On behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), through its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program, I am pleased to present the exhibition, *BALGO: Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills*. This is one of the most impressive exhibitions which DFAT has toured overseas in order to promote greater understanding and awareness of Australia’s Indigenous cultures.

The artworks in this exhibition, which are more colourful than the Indigenous artworks that many viewers would be familiar with, convey the energy and dynamism of the culture of the mainly Kukatja language-speaking artists at the Warlayirti Artists Art Centre in the Balgo Hills region.

Consisting of contemporary paintings and etchings, the exhibition also presents a range of stories that demonstrate the strong connection Aboriginal people have with their traditions and the ways in which they are being maintained today.

*Balgo* is produced by DFAT in conjunction with Artbank, the Australian Government’s art rental program. All the works have been sourced from the Artbank Collection, and Artbank is also making its expertise available to present the exhibition for its international tour.

I am confident that this fascinating exhibition from the Balgo Hills, in my home State of Western Australia, will engage you and promote a deeper understanding of the rich and vibrant culture of Aboriginal Australia.

Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Artbank, the Australian Government’s contemporary art rental initiative, is delighted to be working once again with the Images of Australia Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to produce an exciting new touring exhibition illustrating the strength and vibrancy of Australia’s Indigenous art. *BALGO: Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills* brings together some of the finest contemporary Indigenous art to tour internationally. The exhibition offers a riot of colour and energy while exploring in depth the stories, history and lives of these extraordinary artists.

The exhibition comprises a selection of significant artworks from the Artbank Collection including an important suite of prints by senior Balgo artists expressly acquired for the show. Artists include some of the most respected Balgo painters – already acknowledged as stars by the international art world – and some of the exciting new generation of emerging artists.

Artbank has demonstrated, throughout its 28 years of operation, a commitment to collecting Indigenous art of the highest quality. Our ongoing relationship with DFAT enables us to exhibit the best examples of these works in missions throughout the world. This partnership has promoted an increased understanding of Indigenous Australian culture among international audiences, and we hope the Balgo exhibition further enhances their knowledge and appreciation.

Geoffrey Cassidy
Director, Artbank
In Australia, it's a word that conjures colour and exuberance. It未婚cat an art which is both ancient and contemporary; both abstract and yet resolute of landscape, both spiritual and political.

When acrylic paintings from Balgo, deep in the Western Desert of central Australia, first appeared in the 1980s they shook up what the world understood as ‘traditional’ Indigenous art and disrupted our complacency about what constitutes contemporary Aborigine art. Bold, bright and colourful, the paintings told stories of the landscape and its people, in a way that seemed utterly modern, apparently abstract, and quite exceptional.

But, like the ground-breaking paintings from Papunya in the Central Desert that had set the international spotlight some years before, Balgo art presented a paradox. Deeply conventional, in the sense of conveying important Dreaming stories and tribal law, these paintings were some of the most mythologically intense and traditional the Indigenous cultures of Australia had yet produced. And yet they were being made by contemporary people, using new acrylic media, and in a style that seemed to recall Western modernist abstraction.

Before long, it was this very paradox that began to contribute to our understanding of contemporary life, art and spirituality in Indigenous Australia. In short, art from Balgo is a reminder that an art that combines survival, not only of a people, but of their religion and law, their land and their spirit.

The community at Balgo Hills

The community of Balgo Hills lies in northeast Western Australia in country most often simply referred to as the ‘outback’ of the region, and in country which the majority of Australia, the surrounding Great Sandy, Gibson and Tanami Deserts seem another world away. Darwin is 900 kilometres to the north, while the state capital of Perth is some 1,800 kilometres to the southwest. The closest town of Hills Creek is only 300 kilometres away but, on the rough desert roads, getting there can take up to five hours by car.

The name Balgo is said to come from the Kun disappointment or ‘dirty wind’. It was a site established by priests of the German Catholic Palesteine Order as a mission in 1899, some kilometres away from the present site of Balgo Hills. The priests set up the mission as a refuge for groups of previously nomadic peoples who had been, through the long slow process of colonisation of Australia’s desert country, displaced and their way of life undermined. Dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods, many Kunjalji – including tribal members who had come today’s revered artists – had not seen white people (kangalji) until they came in from the desert to the Balgo mission seeking food and shelter. There, unlike all other mission settlements, the priests and sisters encouraged local language use and Aboriginal customs, allowing traditional culture to be maintained. Also, as many Kunjalji were ‘uprooted’ in the way the missionaries had been in the desert before they encountered Christianity, they came with them to the mission an already formed intimate and deep knowledge of their sacred Dreaming territory.

In 1955, the mission was moved to the new site at Balgo Hills, also known by the local Kunjalji people as Wirrimal, along the Dreaming path from the Stansmore Ranges. Balgo is an important place to the Northern Territory, and west to the other Southern Ranges. Balgo is an important place to the Western Desert landscape is arid desert known as the Western Desert. It was, and still is, a site of ritual exchange. People from across the region come to Balgo to participate in ceremonies. Balgo also is a site where the people maintain the Western Desert sacred Dreaming, where the people maintain the Western Desert sacred Dreaming.

The shared lands of the Western Desert are an important to understanding of Balgo identity. When the mission at Balgo was set up, it brought together a number of different Western Desert language groups including Kunjalji, which is the majority language spoken at Balgo, and Ngardi, Walmajarri, Yali, Wajarigaljung and Warpiri and Punatjara. These language groups are known collectively as Kunjalji, meaning ‘at one’ or ‘of being one of culture. Many Kunjalji also have family and cultural ties to other desert language groups including Warlpiri, Pintupi and Yawuru.

The contemporary art of the Balgo Hills

The contemporary art of Balgo Hills is inextricably linked to the Dreaming. The concept of the Dreaming is a complex and holistic concept that refers to both a three-dimensional mythological place and time, and a living reality. The Dreaming is a site of ritual exchange, where time collides, where ancient knowledge is re-enacted in the here and now. Painting, drawing to the creation of artworks made in acrylic as well as traditional ochres and techniques was weighed up against a very different authority. The contemporary art of Balgo Hills is a revelation; an art that is a statement of contemporary life, art and spirituality in the Western Desert of central Australia. It is the sacred places where the ancestral heroes fashioned the land as they travelled. However, for initiated people, it is also a place where the Dreaming is both outside time and confined, a landscape where the Dreaming is re-enacted in the here and now. Painting, drawing to the creation of artworks made in acrylic as well as traditional ochres and techniques was weighed up against a very different authority.

The narrative of the Dreaming is told through songs, dances and sand paintings. The paintings – which are rich and filled with epic journeys and accounts of love and sexual exploits, with brutal punitive deaths and punishments, with warnings to those who learn them.

The Dreaming is a primordial time, a ‘time before time’, when the world attained form and all animals and plants came into being. For the Dreaming, it is also a story of the present, a reminder of the past, a place where everything is re-enacted in the here and now. Painting, drawing to the creation of artworks made in acrylic as well as traditional ochres and techniques was weighed up against a very different authority.

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Art and iconography

When artists from Balgo paint the Tjukura of their ancestral country, those journeys are at the heart of Kutjungka art, sacred geography is recalled and embodied in every action and every depiction of its contemporary incarnation. Ancient journeys and the country through which ancestors pass are represented by metaphorical schema that include paths, landscape features, symbols... all of which have a spiritual force working in and through them. Nature to the Kutjungka people does not mean (simply) the grass or water or weather. To a Balgo artist, it means how things should be in the ceremonial Dreaming. Depicting nature carries with it the ultimate goal of evoking the knowledge of the Dreaming and the sacred implications of the country he or she depicts. Landscape spaces, symbols – all of which have been coaxed into a cosmic art that is continuously renewed from the time that it is recalled as myth. Country equals story: land equates art, art equals spirit.

For the artists from Balgo, painting is not a mimetic rendering of a place, but is a social interaction performed through space and time and is as much iconic as narrative. Based on symbiosis and affect, the icons in Balgo art are more fluid than the signs used by Indigenous people from other nearby linguistic groups, and often signify several things at once. A windbreak or a hill or a creek or, perhaps, more into a U shape, may represent the people who gather there.

Perhaps as the result of over 60 years of association with the Catholic Church, Balgo iconography also has more naturalistic and representational signs than other Western Desert ‘styles’. Artists such as Susie Buntjung might incorporate a recognizable footprint or two into their own unique Tjapangka through the land and the fires where they cooked their food, into paintings and Miner often shows, in an essentially realistic way, what’s known as ‘milkiwarla’, where the waters of the creeks in the Balgo area are white from the clay leaching from their upper regions. Balgo iconography comes in part from ritual or religious sources as they are transferred to boards or ceremonial objects, or from rock paintings found in secret male and female sacred sites. Indeed, the gender of sites and symbols is a crucial component in the Balgo iconographic schema of the female and male lines is an important aspect of the iconography available to artists. At all of these and other symbols, which relate to anything from bush food like walka (bush apple), tjupurrpa (bush carrott), tandil (bush radish) and more, to current events which become integrated with ancient places, form the basis for Balgo painting.

Most directly, paintings and their attendant symbols come directly out of traditions of sand painting or sand drawing, and from body painting where skin is marked up for ceremonies with lines of alternating light and dark dots. To the Kutjungka people there is a real relationship between the ground and the body, and as the land is seen as sentient and conscious, its features are comparable to the features of the human body. A landscape consists of the ground, a windbreak or a hill or a creek or, perhaps, more into a U shape, may represent the people who gather there.

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Art centres like Warlayirti reveal in microscopic the greater picture of Indigenous art’s strong links with the economy – as both big international business and the simple apparatus of providing a wage to many desert people. But for the artists, no matter who the audience for their work is, they are always separate from the social, nor from the systems of cosmological belief that underpin Indigenous artistic production.
The four dome-like forms of this painting suggest a rocky cave close to where Susie Bootja Bootja was born in the bush. Her mother is resting in the cave, enjoying a break while collecting bush tucker. The extensive dot work portrays tjundar (bush onions) while the black shapes are tjirrilpartja (bush carrots).

Susie Bootja Bootja (b. 1934, Kukatja)  
Kaningarra, near the Canning Stock Route, 2000  
Acrylic on linen, 76 x 50 cm

Pauline Sunfly’s father, Sunfly Tjampitjin, was a senior custodian for a section of country called Liltjin, found south of Balgo near the salt lake of Wilkinkarra (Lake MacKay). The lines in the painting are the dry creek beds which, during the wet season, flow into the lake.

Pauline Sunfly (b. 1957, Kukatja)  
Wilkinkarra, 2007  
Acrylic on linen, 150 x 76 cm

This painting depicts the creation story of Jimmy Tchooga’s father. This story is set in Tchooga’s traditional country of Tjukukalyu, east of Balgo in the Tanami Desert. The central circle represents tjurrnu (soakwater) and the surrounding patterns, the sandhills. The long red lines depict sacred spears used in ceremony.

Jimmy Tchooga (b. c. 1950, Tjaru)  
Tjukukalyu, 2007  
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 75 cm

This painting suggests a rocky cave close to where Susie Bootja Bootja was born in the bush. The four dome-like forms of this painting suggest a rocky cave close to where Susie Bootja Bootja was born in the bush. Her mother is resting in the cave, enjoying a break while collecting bush tucker. The extensive dot work portrays tjundar (bush onions) while the black shapes are tjirrilpartja (bush carrots).
This painting shows some of the features of Bob Dingle Tjapanangka’s father’s country, in the Great Sandy Desert around Wilkinkarra (Lake MacKay). The dynamic central line is a large and distinctive tali, along which are found a series of small tjurrnu, or soakwaters. The two larger opposing circles are warran, or claypans, nearby.

Bob Dingle Tjapanangka (born 1931, Karadja) Wilkinkarra, 1999 Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 60 cm

This painting is of Eubena Nampitjin’s country, which lies east of the middle section of the Canning Stock Route. It is known as Muyajilba after the waterhole featured in the painting’s centre. It is in this country that the artist spent her youth, travelling and hunting with her family.

Eubena Nampitjin (born 1903, Karadja) Muyajilba, 2000 Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm

This painting depicts part of a Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) story for country south of Balgo known as Lambumbunda. In this Tjukurrpa the men made piles of stones while the women cut their hair. They used this hair to weave small skirts known as ninbara.

Joan Nagomara (born 1951, Kukatja) Tjunipa, 1999 Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm

Inyaroo is the name of a series of tjurrnu, or soakwaters. One, seen among the sand dunes, is known as inta, or living water, and never dries out. This is the country where Ningie Nangala lived and hunted with her family; good for collecting pura, or bush tomato, and kantilli, or bush raisin.

Ningie Nangala Nangala (born c. 1955, Kukatja) Inyaroo, c. 2008 Acrylic on linen, 80 x 100 cm

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Ningie Nangala Nangala (born c. 1955, Kukatja) Inyaroo, c. 2008 Acrylic on linen, 80 x 100 cm

Lucy Yukenbarri depicts the country where she lived a nomadic lifestyle with her family before moving to Balgo mission. In the centre is a rockhole which is an important source of water for surrounding area. Large sand dunes (tali) dominate the landscape and there is an abundance of bush food.

Lucy Yukenbarri (c. 1945–2000, Kukatja) Witjinti Soak in the great Sandy Desert, 1998 Acrylic on linen, 80 x 100 cm

Miriam Baadjo has painted her uncle’s country. It involves a story about Tjitji Kutjarra (Two Children) who are believed to have camped here. There is an area nearby for women only which is believed to have been formed by women’s tears. Maparn (healing powers) are contained in some rocks found here.

Miriam Baadjo (born 1946, Kukatja) Tjitji Kutjarra, 2008 Acrylic on linen, 50 x 100 cm

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Miriam Baadjo (born 1946, Kukatja) Tjitji Kutjarra, 2008 Acrylic on linen, 50 x 100 cm
This painting is of country known as Parwalla located far to the south of Balgo. Most of the painting shows tali, or sand dunes, and different bush foods including kantilli or bush raisin and minyali (seed). Women are shown as U shapes, with their wanna (digging sticks) and coolamons (wooden carrying dishes).

Elizabeth Nyumi (born 1947, Pintupi)  
Parwalla, 2000  
Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 82 cm

Left
The Warlayirti Suite  
This suite of ten etchings was produced by respected publisher Northern Editions, based at Charles Darwin University, working closely with Warlayirti Artists. Artists are: Eubena Nampitjin (who presents areas of country Kinyu, named after the spirit dog, and Midjul named for a key soakwater); Elizabeth Nyumi (whose country Parwalla fills with water after the wet season and produces an abundance of bush foods); Helicopter Tjungurrayi (whose country Wangkartu is named after the soakwater in the centre of the print); Tjumpo Tjapanangka (depicting country near the vast salt lake named Wilkinkarra or Lake MacKay); Kathleen Paddoon (whose Nakarra Nakarra is the site of the Seven Sisters Dreaming); Fred Tjakamarra (whose Lappi Lappi country is dominated by sandhill lines which also represent hunting sparses); Ningie Nangala (who has depicted her country Walu, named after the rockhole seen in the centre), and Brandy Tjungurrayi (who tells the story of Pinti, a bird and an important figure who led the sacred Tingari men during the Dreaming).
Boxer Milner’s country along the shores of Sturt Creek is known as Windirr. The lower half of the painting shows the tributaries, and the top half shows billabongs along the banks. The waters have turned white, known as ‘milkwater’, which occurs after heavy rains in the upper clay reaches of the creek.

Boxer Milner (born 95, Tjaru/Walmajarri) Windirr, 2000 Acrylic on linen, 50 x 76 cm

Lucy Loomoo has painted Two Old Men Dreaming, a Tjukurrpa story for a site in her country. The two men are distinguished in the landscape as two important rockholes. In the Tjukurrpa the two men urinated here and the site turned to little white stones seen either side of the two waterholes.

Lucy Loomoo (born c. 95, Kukatja/Pintupi) Nyaru, 2000 Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 50 cm

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Helicopter Tjungurrayi describes the surrounding landscape as ‘sandhill country’. Small black circles represent walku (bush apple) trees which are prolific in the area.

Helicopter Tjungurrayi (born c. 947, Kukatja) Warrwiya Soak, Near Jupiter Well, 1998 Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 80 cm

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Lucy Loomoo (born c. 95, Kukatja/Pintupi) Nyaru, 2000 Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 50 cm

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Helicopter Tjungurrayi (born c. 947, Kukatja) Warrwiya Soak, Near Jupiter Well, 1998 Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 80 cm

This country belongs to the artist. He has depicted a large soakage called Warrwiya which has good reliable water. Helicopter Tjungurrayi describes the surrounding landscape as ‘sandhill country’. Small black circles represent walku (bush apple) trees which are prolific in the area.
Kathleen Paddoon  
Nakarra Nakarra, 2007  
Acrylic on Belgian linen, 120 x 80 cm  
Nakarra Nakarra is the site of the Seven Sisters Dreaming, a story about sisters who travelled this country, running from an old man who wanted to marry the youngest. Today at Nakarra Nakarra, a group of hills (here in red) embodies the sisters, surrounded by tali (sand dunes) in white.

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Brandy Tjungurrayi  
Narroo, 2000  
Acrylic on linen, 120 x 80 cm  
Brandy Tjungurrayi has painted his traditional country, called Narroo. The squares represent a particular type of bush seed collected here, known as djalparri. These black seeds are ground up to make damper (bush bread). Through the middle of the painting a number of soakwaters have been depicted.

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‘We write the story down in English, about the country [the painting relates to], but only little bit of the story, not too much. The sacred bits we keep secret.’  
Jimmy Tchooga
John Lee Tjakamarra  
(born 956, Kukatja/Ngardi)  
luurnpa, 999  
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 76 cm  
This painting shows luurnpa, the Kingfisher who is a Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) ancestor, and some of the associated landscape features near Balgo. Along the lower edge are parmarr, or hills, between which are tjurrnu, or soakwaters. The shapes in the centre are two creeks that drain to the north and south of Balgo.