From the Margin to the Centre; Ngarra, ‘really artist’ of the central north Kimberley
Philippa Jahn

Last November saw the publication of a monograph on a little known component of the body of work produced by Kimberley artist Ngarra: a collection of remarkable texta drawings, of which some 130 colour reproductions are included in the book alongside essays by Nick Tapper, Henry Skerritt and Kevin Shaw. We recommend this work not just for the revelation of the drawings but also the insight it offers into the life trajectory of an Aboriginal man born during the early days of white intrusion into the north Kimberley. Like many of his contemporaries, after a lifetime of exploitation and invisibility he decided to give voice to matters of vital importance to his generation via the one channel available to him – the flourishing national interest in Indigenous contemporary art. This decision was made late in life with specific purpose and was maintained with a singular drive until physical fragility overtook him.

Ngarra was born around 1920 at Kalkada (now on Glenroy Station) in the central north Kimberley, the country of the little-known Andinyin language group. Prior to the early twentieth century this region sustained numerous small family groups who over generations had balanced social, cultural and environmental imperatives with the plentiful resources available to them. In the Kimberley it was one of the last areas to be settled owing to its rugged terrain and inaccessibility. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century however the world of the Andinyin came to experience the radical social change imposed by a new order of European, Afghan and Asian settlers, participants in a pastoral industry rapaciously seeking new territory to exploit. Despite resistance, they had little hope of accommodating the newcomers’ presence on an equal footing let alone holding their intrusion at bay. Subsequent decades of violence, disease, dislocation and forced labour decimated the original populations and wrought widespread social change, with minimal attention paid by the invaders to the individuals, lifeways and knowledge being lost. Aboriginal people who survived this period held their memories, oral histories and cosmological beliefs close however. Tourism and pastoralism now provide the most obvious stamp of human activity in Ngarra’s ancestral country, but his art legacy is a pharos for the complex parallel world beneath.
During Ngarra’s childhood the more remote recesses of the Kimberley were known to be beyond the reach of European law, with the new settlers able to effect the control of land using methods successfully applied in frontier country elsewhere in the country. ‘Dispersal’ was the euphemism commonly applied to violence intended to eliminate troublemakers – local groups either defying incursion into their country or attempting to survive without submitting to white demands once settlement appeared irreversible. The population plummeted and those remaining faced two choices. Most became indentured, unpaid labourers to pastoralists, an arrangement ratified by state law following the 1905 Aborigines Act. This legislation required (amongst other things) that all workers be registered under a permit system and was notionally intended to confer a level of protection. In practice however it became thereby illegal for Aboriginal people to ‘abscond’ or refuse to work, without any reciprocal responsibility from pastoralists to provide a standard of living beyond meagre rations in return.

A minority defied the new regime, choosing to survive independently in inhospitable country beyond the reach of capricious whites. During childhood Ngarra counted amongst them; his mother died when he was very young and he lived on stock camps with extended family until he was beaten by an uncle, at which point he ran away to his maternal grandfathers and their wives. This small family group of elderly Mananambarra navigated a marginalised life at Warrangadada, now known as the Mornington Ranges. This was country they knew intimately, on the fringes not only of the new stations but also the decimated remnants of kin groups who had been forced to accommodate the new pastoral regime. His maternal grandfathers in particular were seminal figures in his early life. As Mananambarra, they ensured that Ngarra was thoroughly inculcated in
traditional life-ways. He was thereby one of the last of his generation to grow up largely insulated from encroaching modernity, steeped daily in ancestral philosophy, ceremony and ritual. In maturity he was acknowledged as an authority on Ngarrangkarni ('Dreaming') Law - as East Kimberley painter Timmy Timms once described him: 'This Ngarrangarri standing up here. [If] him bin Catholic, him Pope, and everybody gotta bend at the knee'.

Ngarra's proud identity as a 'really bush blackfella' and senior cultural custodian for a wide swathe of Kimberley country is integral to understanding his drive to produce art for a mainstream audience in his senior years, as well as his chosen subject matter.

Eventually Ngarra's isolated life with his older relatives became unsustainable, particularly as a young man needing peers and marriageable partners. Ngarra re-joined his extended family and participated again in the pastoral industry, gaining a widespread reputation for his outstanding ability as a stockman which he maintained over many years. Station life entailed a radical reworking of certain traditional practices for Aboriginal people, but it did at least allow for their continuation to some degree and Ngarra, like others, managed to uphold his cultural obligations within the constraints of the imposed station routine.

A degree of social equilibrium was eventually reached and the industry continued relatively unchanged until the late 1960s; dependent almost entirely on the labour of Aboriginal men and women. A number of factors eventually combined to render early pastoral practices unsustainable however. Technological advances were encroaching on the need for manual labour, but it was the impact of the long-overdue Equal Wages Award legislation in 1967 which finally ensured that even the chronically underpaid yet vital contribution of Aboriginal people to the industry was no longer wanted. So began yet another process of social, geographic and cultural upheaval.

Within a few years many groups who identified themselves with particular stations either walked or were again forced off land traditionally theirs. Disparate groups of proud station workers gathered on the outskirts of the few small towns across the region, where infrastructure was inadequate and material conditions even worse than on the stations. Tolerance of these injustices was by now irrevocably eroded both for local Aboriginal people and in the wider political arena. Agitation for change saw support for policies of self-determination and the beginning of a homelands movement which eventually saw some groups move back to excisions of station land and later, to purchase station leases. Native Title claims have been successful in some areas but economic independence and the fight for cultural continuity have remained serious challenges.

It is against this socio-political backdrop that art produced for the marketplace became an economic necessity and, conveniently, the wider public were ready to take notice. The first of the old stock workers began to produce paintings for a cross-cultural audience in this next decade of radical change: the 1970s. Whilst artefacts and artwork had been produced sporadically for some time, particularly in response to localised demand generated by tourists, collectors, anthropologists and missionaries, it took this particular confluence of circumstances to enable production to become consistent and the emerging art movement legitimate.
Perceptions of the artwork began to straddle the ethnographic curiosity / contemporary art divide and eventually hurdled it entirely. The story of the development of Kimberley art since this time now has its own accepted narrative, with art centres playing a central role. There are always outliers however, those whose artwork enriches the story of art in the Kimberley; Ngarra is such a figure.

Art practitioners who, by choice or circumstance, have worked outside the developing art centre network and attracted wider interest have invariably benefitted from a strong personal relationship with a katiya (whitefella) willing to act as intermediary between the mainstream art world and the artist. Ngarra and Kevin Shaw were one such partnership, enjoying a deep friendship which spanned some 30 years. Shaw’s summary of this period and the role he played in his art career, at Ngarra’s insistence, forms the textual heart of Tapper’s book.

As anthropologist Shaw writes, in 1994 Ngarra announced his decision to become ‘a really artist’ and that his Jabiji (grandson) Shaw was going to help himv. Despite protestations that he knew nothing about art, Shaw was obliged to do his best to facilitate Ngarra’s entry to the whitefella art world. He was instrumental in introducing him to commercial gallerist Diane Mossenson who subsequently developed his profile with a series of solo and group exhibitionsvi. Shaw’s role was more extensive than mere cultural mediation however, taking care of his friend’s physical needs, providing living and studio space in his own home, procuring quality art materials, recording and interpreting stories, traveling with him across the Kimberley and beyond. Without this intimate involvement we wouldn’t now have Ngarra’s artistic legacy and the informed documentation which accompanies it.

According to Shaw Ngarra had always enjoyed sketching. His first exhibitions however were of kurdi (wooden coolamon) and canvases painted with an extensive palette of pigments he’d collected from country. Ochre, with its Ngarrangkarni associations, was his first preference as a painting medium. When collecting and preparing it became too arduous he turned to acrylic, the medium for which he is better known. His experimentation with textas was a response to wet season difficulties with managing ochre, but he continued to enjoy the aesthetic possibilities they offered throughout his careervii.

There are some similarities between Ngarra’s acrylic paintings and texta drawings, but the array of drawings on offer in Tapper’s book make clear that the texta work is more experimental and offered the artist greater flexibility in terms of subject matter and style; their vitality and originality is compelling. The drawings fall loosely into two categories, each with their own formal conventions: depictions of country, and figurative / narrative works, generally with their associated Ngarrangkarni symbolism. There are also more informal secular sketches in which station life features heavily; vignettes of horses, cattle and stock workers resonate with character, a nostalgic return to a working life clearly relished in many respects (he obviously had a soft spot for the clean lines of a Cuban heeled riding boot). But it is the more complex work which repays close attention.
The viewpoint of these drawings varies from lateral to aerial both within and between works, a compositional device favoured by artists elsewhere in the Kimberley, particularly in the east. These choices aren’t random however, nor necessarily related to aesthetic preferences, but have their own logic. Features of the landscape, however much abstracted, appear to be depicted according to the perspective which most clearly allows them to be identified. Watercourses for example are aerial, the perspective which best shows the characteristic of a watercourse. Prominent hills are depicted laterally, for the same reason. This can be seen in a number of the drawings of Ngamangray, a religious site related to fertility. Two simplified monolithic hill shapes occupy the centre of the image, around which other shapes are arrayed. It would be unwise to be too reductive in analysing these choices however. Such abstracted shapes can hold a range of significations depending on their context which, when drawn together, offer layered readings. The hills of Ngamangray, for example, are also the breasts of a Ngarrangkarni woman whose body stretches across country. This capacity for code-switching within a design confers great compositional flexibility to the artist, which Ngarra was able to exploit to the full.

The drawings of country and the figurative/narrative works diverge stylistically. Depictions of the significant places of his birth country are abstractions, with fewer design elements comprised of solid colour blocks, white space and large dots, in compositions conveying the gravitas of their subject without the signature application of sparse white dots found in his acrylic paintings. Shadow and textural interest is provided by Ngarra’s manipulation of the texta ink’s translucence using varied pen strokes.

Manganda c. 1997-98 (Photo Con Macarlin) © the artist and Mossenson Art Foundation

His drawings of animals, spirit beings and Ngarrangkarni narratives are as visually arresting but perhaps more playful. Much of the strength of these works lies in Ngarra’s interest in the fundamental geometry of design; they are alive with linear tension and the correspondences between blocks of strong colour, black and white. In the most resolved works his elegant representations of animals and birds blend seamlessly with these tensions. Analogous to his own path in life he refuses to work to the symmetrical boundaries of the paper sheet, preferring instead the dynamism of an implied edge, which he then liked to transgress. A figure will step across a drawn frame, or the white space beyond an image will become incorporated as an important compositional element.
Ngarra’s drawings reveal the pleasure he took from pattern and detail. Dots are not simply dots, but applied in multiple variations and colours adding greatly to the movement and energy of each work. These dots, as well as the meandering and parallel lines, dashes, cross-hatching, scallops and circles which he used for infill are all traditional ochre painting and engraving design elements found on Kimberley wooden and shell objects as well as in the rock art and are possibly not merely decorative. Ngarra is likely to have been well-practiced in these techniques. Indeed the coolamon he made for his first exhibition were painted in two styles - that passed down from his grandfathers and that of his ‘own idea’. It is as if the texta medium he later took up afforded new aesthetic possibilities particularly suited to his aptitude for drawing and willingness to experiment.

Ngarra appears to have been as independent in his attitude to art-making as he was to life more broadly. By Shaw’s account he preferred to work alone and wouldn’t tolerate interruption by others. He was obviously aware of the contemporary art activity of others in the Kimberley and probably familiar with the paintings being heralded from Warmun in the east for example, yet his own work does not conform to any regional ‘school’ and his cultural authority enabled him to range across a number of subjects. This isn’t to suggest that his work does not incorporate motifs and iconographic elements which regionally locate it, rather that the idiosyncrasies of his drawings in particular indicate the extent to which he was able to rework these according to his own aesthetic vision.
There are other historical figures and more recent remote artists who have chosen to draw, and similarly forged independent paths as artists. Some drew attention at the time but little that has endured. In the Kimberley, Nyikina man Joseph (‘Butcher Joe’) Nangan is a case in point. Nangan was using art as a means of cross-cultural engagement from the 1960s, producing an extensive body of delicate pencil drawings for a number of researchers as well as art dealer Mary Macha for several decades. Despite his inclusion in private and public collections he is rarely exhibited and his position in the standard narrative of Indigenous contemporary art history has received scant attention. Until recently Indigenous drawings have largely flown under the radar, their significance languishing in the shadow of the painting movement. It’s possible that the drawing medium allowed a certain freedom for Indigenous artists however - from both internal cultural constraints and the desires and demands of a wider art world dazzled by ochre and acrylic.

As an extension of a pre-contact drawing tradition they are a rich resource for insight into the role of art in Australia’s cross-cultural history. They intitate not only how classical Indigenous art forms were, over decades, reworked for other purposes and wider audiences, but also why. Over almost a century of navigating cultural difference and social flux without surrendering his worldview Ngarra particularly embodies the principles of relationship outlined in the Ngarrangkarni, in which there is no oppositional ‘other’ but an eternally unfolding differentiated ‘us’, a philosophical orientation towards balance and incorporation. Similar to other senior Indigenous artists, in his art practice he was driven to illustrate the importance of his own worldview to others in an attempt to inspire acknowledgement and understanding. As Skerritt describes in his essay, ‘We should always remember that the meaning of his forms (that is the meaning of painting as an
autonomous medium, divorced from its ceremonial context) was forged in cross-cultural exchange... Every experiment in medium and form was an attempt to find a new way to convince outsiders of the power of his message." An outside audience doesn’t have to be educated to the inner meaning of his depictions; we can still feel the potency of their intent. ‘Relation is learning more and more to go beyond judgements into the dark of art’s upsurgings.’

The drawings reproduced at the end of Tapper’s book are some of Ngarra’s last before his death in 2008. These later compositions are pared back to rhythmic divisions of white paper using spare coloured lines and dots. They are distilled visions of Andinyin clan estates – syntheses of country and relationship, the symbiotic foundations of Aboriginal life and central to Ngarra’s own existence. One in particular is an arresting finale to both the life and the book, the fragile work entitled ‘Juxtaposition of Clan Estates and Pensioner Stallion Dreaming of his Life’. This abstract depiction of the country of his birth hosts the blue silhouette of a solitary horse, simultaneously shadow and solid form, portending the transition of this master communicator and journeyman of two worlds back to the realm of the Ngarrangkarni.

Images courtesy of Mossenson Art Foundation.
i N Tapper 2015, *Ngarra; the texta drawings*, Mossenson Art Foundation, Coolbinia, Western Australia.

ii The Ngarinyin / Andinyin term (pl.) for senior men and women, repositories of ancestral knowledge.

iii K Shaw, op.cit., p.36.

iv K Shaw, op.cit., p.35.


vi K Shaw, op.cit., p.37.

vii N Tapper, op.cit., p.172.


ix ibid., p.37.


References


Tapper, N 2015, *Ngarra; the texta drawings*, Mossenson Art Foundation, Coolbinia, Western Australia.