Australian Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert- The Donald Kahn Collection

Exhibition 3 December 1994- 28 January 1995
Admission free

Western Desert Art describes a school of painters from Central Australia who are socially, and in a broad sense culturally, part of western Desert society. During the past twenty years an extraordinary painting movement has developed in this region which has attracted increasing international attention. Combining divergent artistic, cultural and political languages in a highly sophisticated manner, these works of art pose a considerable challenge to the conventions of European art viewing and interpretation.

Prior to European contact, the symbolic forms of Central Australian paintings were produced on large, natural surfaces such as rock faces, the ground or the human body. The modern painting movement began in 1971 when a young Australian schoolteacher encouraged the children and elders of the Papunya community to paint traditional subjects on rectangular canvases or artists' board. Since then, the artists have habitually worked in acrylics on canvas or board using variants of the classic 'dot style' pioneered in Papunya in the 1970's, and continuing the traditional iconography of the Western Desert peoples.

In its simplicity of form and symbolic references, the art of the Western desert reflects the bonds between the peoples and their land. It is inseparable from a desire to protect the *Tjukurrpa*, and to ensure its continuity.

The term *Tjukurrpa* describes a concept which is fundamental to Aboriginal culture and, as such, inseparable from any analysis of Aboriginal art. Commonly translated into English as 'dreamings' or 'dreamtime', the term must be more widely described as a worldview, an all-encompassing mode of thought which functions as a belief system, a history and a guide to living. *Tjukurrpa* is timeless, referring to the creation of all things and their continued existence in the past, present and future. It is expressed through the land- the rocks, mountains and creeks of The Central Australian desert; and the people- their history, and the rituals and ceremony of daily life.

The particular style which unites the 34 Western Desert artists represented in this exhibition has arisen from a need to protect the *Tjukurrpa* and make a claim to their land. Their work can be seen as a kind of symbolic landscape painting, recording the continuing existence of the *Tjukurrpa* in

the physical world. Through symbolic forms it makes reference to the land and its people, the paths of the ancestral beings who travelled the land at the time of creation and the laws which govern behaviour in the present day.

In order to fulfil their fundamental goal of protecting and preserving the *Tjukurrpa* it is essential to the Aborigines that they regain control of their land, and thus the art also constitutes a political statement. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, a contemporary Aboriginal artist, makes the following appeal to non-Aboriginal viewers: "I ask that you recognise that the paintings are not just beautiful pictures. They are about Aboriginal law, Aboriginal life. They are also about out resistance over the past 200 years and our refusal to forget the land of our ancestors. They are about cultural, social and political survival".

That so many leading artists of the Western Desert are represented in this exhibition we can attribute to Donald Kahn's passion for, and curiosity about, this art. Since 1988 he has built up a collection of contemporary Aboriginal paintings with the specific intention of creating a touring exhibition which would inform people all over the world about Aboriginal art. Rather than attempting to cover the whole spectrum of Aboriginal art, the exhibition focuses on a specific geographical region with small but highly influential painting communities. By narrowing its focus, the exhibition hopes to address some of the complex issues surrounding the production and reception of contemporary Aboriginal art.

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