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The East Kimberley painting movement: performing colonial history

Arnaud Morvan

- 1 This paper is based on PhD research undertaken at the EHESS -Paris and the University of Melbourne between 2005 and 2010. My fieldwork was based in the East Kimberley Region of north-west Australia around the community of Turkey Creek, and the towns of Kununurra and Wyndham. I collaborated with a group of contemporary artists named Jirrawun Arts, on the everyday running of the corporation and as archivist and anthropologist. The present paper will be mainly based on artworks by Rover Thomas, Paddy Bedford and Rammey Ramsey.
- 2 The Kimberley Region of north-West Australia hosted an important amount of anthropological research during the 20th century. Some of this early research took as subject Australian indigenous temporality, and in particular the dynamic local responses to colonization, through ritual performances (including, songs, paintings and body movements). Some of these ritual performances later developed into independent art forms that circulated internationally within the art market.
- 3 My own research focuses on one of these art movements called the East Kimberley school of painting, in its relation to colonial history.
- 4 European settlement began at the end of the 19th century through the development of cattle industry. Violent conflicts erupted between two groups, on one side the local Aboriginal people, on the other farmers and local police. This period is remembered today by local indigenous people as the “killing time”. . As a result of colonization, local populations were displaced, many suffered from disease, and various forms of mistreatment. By the 1920's, most Aboriginal families were living on or around cattle stations, working as cheap labor for the cattle industry. This situation of interdependency lead to a high level of intercultural exchanges.
- 5 It is in this post-contact context that several ethnographic fieldworks were conducted. In 1937 an archeology and ethnography expedition was sent from Germany by the

Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt to study Kimberley rock art and record firsthand accounts from indigenous people who had lived and worked with ancient and contemporary rock art.

- 6 The mission was led by anthropologists Elmut Petri and Andreas Lommel who worked in the West and Central Kimberley among the Wunambal, Ngarinyin and Worora language groups in 1937 and 1938.
- 7 Beside rock art material, Petri and Lommel's most valuable contribution to Australian anthropology was their precise description of several so called "traveling ceremonies" or mytho-history, showing how local groups integrated some element of the colonial contact into mythical narrative. The most famous and well documented of these ceremonies was called Kurangara. (also documented by Berndt in the south Kimberley and Tanami regions). This ritual, coming from the east, was reported by Lommel as transposing the destructive impact from European settlement in what he analyses as an apocalyptic myth.
- 8 Lommel explains that the Europeans were mythically associated with a new cultural hero named Tjamba, described in the following abstract:

"his house was made of corrugated iron and behind it grow poisonous weeds. Tjamba is able to impart the unknown disease of leprosy and syphilis (..) He hunts with a rifle and ornaments his slabs with iron tool. To distribute his slabs to men, he uses aeroplane, motor cars and steamers. (..) (in exchange), he ask them for tea, sugar and bread. Following the myth, the modern cult demands exuberant feast with tea, sugar, bread and as much beef as possible but no meat from any indigenous animal. The cult places have to be in the vicinity of farms and station. "¹
- 9 The Kurangara was an important step in the Aboriginal response and adaptation to colonization. The ritual shows some destructive effects of the European presence, associated with the diffusion of a poison. While Lommel analyzed this Kurangara as leading the an apocalypse, showing the incapacity of the Wunambal to integrate and react to the colonizer intrusion, others such as Ronald Berndt or Barbara Glowczewski, pointed out that the ritual also proposed the initiate with the possibility of appropriation of European technology to redirect their destructive powers toward the invaders.
- 10 In a wider historical sense, the Kurangara like other types of historical rituals that have circulated in the Kimberley in the 20th century, reveal an indigenous interpretation of the colonial contact, wich can be called counter-narrative.
- 11 The new art form of ochre paintings that emerge in the East Kimberley in the late 1970's, has a lot to do with counter narratives, an indigenous reading of the past, combining art, performance and history.

I. From ritual performances to a new art form

- 12 The East Kimberley region is located between the Kimberley cultural block on the west and the western desert cultural block on the east. Rock art can be find all over the area with dating going back to 20 000 years. Stylistically, it belongs to the Victoria River Basin area which shows naturalistic depiction of men, animals and mythical figures, painted with red ochre and highlighted with white clay.
- 13 The artistic singularity of the region consists of the use of painted wooden boards carried on people shoulder in public rituals. The first of these painted boards to have

attracted non-Aboriginal attention were part of a ceremony called Gurirr Gurirr, developed in 1975 and early 80s' by the late Rover Thomas, an Kukadja man from the desert, exiled in the Kija community of Warmun. The Gurirr Gurirr ceremony consist of a large body of songs, dances and paintings, and aimed to follow the journey of a recently deceased woman spirit trying to return to its spiritual centre, at a distance of several hundred kilometres.

- 14 The *Gurrir Gurrir* ceremony is a narrative dance and song cycle of *balga* type, a medium by which both current and historical events and traditional spirit stories can be revealed in public. For each of the song-lines performers carry painted boards or other structures on their shoulders, following the movement of the dancers' bodies. A few years after the first performance, the boards attracted the attention of several museums and art institutions. Soon a group of Kija painters decided to produce canvases, intentionally created as artworks. The early paintings and boards were relatively simple images illustrating a single site, spirit or event, emerging from dark red ochre or black backgrounds and rarely employing more than three colours
- 15 The ceremony was "found" by Thomas in a series of dream revelations starting shortly after the destruction of the city of Darwin by the cyclone Tracy in December 1974. In the Gurirr Gurirr, the destruction of Darwin was associated with the wrath of the ancestral "rainbow serpent" figure. The ceremony, was presented as a way to remember specific cultural sites and events that had been forgotten. It soon became an instrument of cultural appropriation of the land, and eventually was responsible for the development of a new art form of paintings on wood or canvas.
- 16 In term of style, the landscape is not painted from a fixed side view, but can mix a planar perspective and a lateral view. An object can be depicted from several angles at once.
- 17 Unlike desert art, which represents these traces with an ensemble of interlinked geometric signs, painters of the Kimberley create a raw expression, which consists of decomposing the visible or invisible elements of the landscape into large blocks of ochre, to be reassembled in the form of a topological map. The dimensions, distances and proportions are then redefined by the artists according to mythical, psychological or memorial criteria. The landscape is treated as if it had been X-rayed and unveils a geography invisible to the naked eye, suggested by transparency. As Judith Ryan wrote: 'The Kija artists of Warmun in the east Kimberley look beneath the surface of the country to the bones, or structure. This organic structure determines the compositional rhythm of their work.'²
- 18 The paintings thus give the impression of a four-dimensional space: horizontal, vertical, in depth and movement which express the unstable relationships, the gaps and movements between the elements. Landscape here, in a holistic concept.
- 19 In terms of semiology and relation between images and memory, I refer to Peirce and the indexical nature of Kija signs. In the paintings, visual elements are in a causal relation with their referents, because the ochre used in the paintings are often come from the place depicted in the image. The painting then contains the very substance of the landscape, and also the trace of the artists hand as a residue of the performance of the painting, and associated songs. This indexical nature of the signs allows us to overcome the basic opposition between presence and representation. It also makes it

possible to link the visual aspect of the concept of “trace” or imprint with its temporal nature as what remains of something that was once in a place.

- 20 As visual art tradition, Kija art moves away from a purely representational image to be something close to a mnemonic technique. The concept of imprint and indexicality is here quite relevant. I studied the way a painting creates a link between the visual aspect of an imprint as a visual mark, and its temporal aspect as memory.
- 21 Images, movement and songs need to be closely associated in order to understand the full reference specific events in the paintings.

II. The historical feature of the Gurirr Gurirr ceremony

- 22 Studying the Gurirr Gurirr corpus, I identified several song lines and painting that clearly refers to contemporary or historical events.
- 23 Paddy Jaminji was the first Kija artist to start painting on boards under the instruction of Rover Thomas. Thomas himself only took on painting around 1982-1983. The painting *Cyclone Tracy*, (c. 1983 -National Gallery of Australia), by Paddy Jaminji, typical of the simple compositions of the first boards, shows the destruction of the city of Darwin by ancestral forces associated with mythical figure of the Rainbow Serpent:
- 24 The painting shows the trace left by the cyclone after the destruction of Darwin. The larger part of the “U” shape is in fact the location of the ravaged city. We can read the movement of the cyclone, moving from bottom to top. We can see two distinct temporal references condensed in the same imprint: the destroyed city, associated with European settlement and colonial history, and on the other the Rainbow Serpent associated with the permanency and continuity of cultural life.
- 25 In the Gurirr Gurirr, on arriving at a place called Mount King (Karlalungyu) near the Bedford Downs cattle station, the spirit of the old woman encountered what was described as “a shadow” over the mountain³. The shadow refers to a well-known Aboriginal massacre committed by station managers around 1924 on Bedford Downs Station massacre. Aboriginal stockmen were arrested by the police and sent to the Wyndham Jailhouse 200 km north, for the alleged spearing of cattle. They were subsequently sent back to the station, poisoned and burnt at Mount King.
- 26 Le title of the artwork, *The shade from the hill comes over and talks in langage* (1984 - Holmes à Court Collection), is the translation of the song XV of the Gurirr Gurirr : « *Numpi-rrina kunya nyarima munga lurrpungu* » in reference to the spirits of those killed by local farmers, in reprisal for the spearing of a caw. Here the spirits of the dead are only mentioned by the use of the word “numpi-rrina” (*shade*).
- 27 In the painting the white clouds represent the dead, only mentioned in this way because the massacre story wasn't open to a non indigenous public. Traces of the colonial presence became an undefined presence in the landscape. This massacre becomes more detailed and complex story in the art of another artist, Paddy Bedford, Kija traditional owner of the place.
- 28 Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford was born in the early 1920's at Bedford Downs, a cattle station in the East Kimberley. Like a lot of men from his generation, he learnt to be a *stockman* and passed a large part of his life driving cattle from one side of the Kimberley to the other for simple rations of tea, sugar and tobacco. This difficult existence

nevertheless allowed him to travel his land, visiting sacred sites and perpetuating the ceremonies that link people to the land and *ngarangany* (the Kija law and Dreaming). In 1997, he joined the artists group *Jirrawun Arts*, created by his nephew Freddie Timms and art director Tony Oliver. Jirrawun Arts was established with the intention of creating a community model constructed around a school, a painting studio, a performance space, and a cattle station to secure financial autonomy. Bedford, leader of the Jirrawun artists, became in the space of a few years, one of the most recognized painters in the country, one of his painting was transferred into the inside wall of the Musée du quai Branly in 2006.

- 29 Also Bedford was one of the traditional custodian of the site of Mont King where the Bedford Downs massacre took place. This allowed him to reveal more on this place, its mythical signification as well as its historical imprint.
- 30 Bedford's painting 'Emu Dreaming 2003', shows the sacred site Emu Gap, at Mount King, (Karlalungyu) depicted from a planar perspective. The canvas is divided into two sections: the white rectangle represents Mount King; the black section the area shows plain in front of the mountain. The mythical story of the two ancestral beings (associated with the Emu and the Turkey) refers to the alternation of day and night and is echoed in the monochromatic symbolism of the painting.
- 31 The paths, eroded into the mountain, trace the ancestors' attempts to cross the ranges. In the story, the Emu gets "stuck" forever in the mountain, which, in the painting, is embodied by a white circle surrounded by a black line. The entrapped Emu is responsible for the splitting of the day and the night, and left an impressive gap in the mountain still visible today.
- 32 On the top left corner of the painting, the attention is drawn towards the only colored element of the canvas, a red circle that emerges from the black ground. The red pigment circle materializes the massacres location, the place where the bodies of Mr. Bedford's ancestors were burnt after being killed. Today, a circle of tree stumps, reminiscent of pyres, are still visible.
- 33 The composition of the painting plays on the two focal points, the trapped Emu and the massacre site. Through the white circle, the mythical ancestors' ending is incited, and in its red counterpart rests the evidence of the artists' relatives' deaths; historical marks on the country counterbalancing the mythical presence in the landscape. In this visual correspondence, the artist seems to suggest that the historical events are also linked with the *ngarranggarni* (dreaming), and that the massacre site is only a starting point. Indeed, Bedford and his brother-in-law, the late Timmy Timms, were the guardians of a cycle of public songs and dances (*joonba*) that tells the story of what happens to spirits in the afterlife.
- 34 After they die and their bodies are burnt, the spirits of the dead climb up the mountain to the west. They walk along the side of a cliff and look back to the fire where they had died, but eventually continue on travelling west until they meet a "clever man" (a shaman) and give him the song for the *joonba*. He tells the spirits that this is not their place and to go back to Kija country⁴. According to Peggy Patrick, the current owner of the *joonba*, the ceremony was found by a Worora shaman (song man), in the west Kimberley, and was then "given back" to a Kija man through the traditional exchange network known as *wurnan*.

- 35 In 2000, while working on these massacres paintings⁵, Paddy Bedford, and Timmy Timms began remembering the songs and performances associated with the painting. The old *joonba* was woken up and then reveal for the first time to a non-Aboriginal audience through a series of major paintings exhibition, and a series of performances in Darwin, Perth and Melbourne, mixing traditional *joonba* sequences with western style theatrical parts, in a cross-cultural performances.
- 36 In putting artworks such as 'Emu Dreaming 2003' in the public domain⁶ Paddy Bedford and Timmy Timms have revealed the full extent of the events that happened at Bedford Downs. The *joonba*'s paintings and performances integrates historical deaths into the *ngarranggarni*, sliding back and forth between historical and mythical dimensions.
- 37 I have attended some of those traditional parts in the outstation of Bow River and Rugun in 2007. This allowed me to get a better understanding of the relation between the paintings and the performances. What I tried to understand is how the visual representation of the historical event of the massacre was also expressed in songs and performances, and what relations happened between visual images, songs and movements.

III. Performing art and history

- 38 In his phenomenological approach, Alfred Gell emphasizes the concept of drawing as "residue". Referring to the Layars' analysis of Malakulan dancer's path and sand drawings, he notes:
- 39 It is surely useful to consider the act of drawing as akin to dancing, and the design as a kind of frozen residue left by the manual ballet. Indeed, just this analogy seems to have suggested itself to Merleau-Ponty, after witnessing a close-up, and slowed-down, cinematographic record of Matisse's hand and brush engaged in the act of painting.⁷
- 40 In the Bedford Downs *joonba*, the massacre event is specifically associated with the use of thread-cross emblems called *woorrangoo*, and shows how the combination of visual signs, movements and sounds, cause an object to manifest an event in a place while performed. In the ceremony, small *woorrangoo*, which refer to the spirits of the dead, are made from a double wooden cross on which blue, red and yellow strings are stretched creating a long, coloured diamond shape image. Dancers hold the *woorrangoo* during the performance, turning it rapidly from side to side around them, creating a coloured blur. When they are performed, they manifest both the burning of the bodies and the spirits of the dead people looking back at their burning bodies in front of Mount King at sunset⁸.
- 41 They are associated with the following song-line:
- 'Ngindil ba 'ngindil ma'nay, 'Ngindil ba 'ngindil ma'nay,
Marrirri ma'naay, dilirri ma'naay, marrirri ma'naa dilirri ma'naa
Ngindil ba ngindil manaa dilirri ma naa dilirri ma'naa.*
- The sparking of the fire, the sparking of the fire,
- The brightness of the sunset, brightness of burning, the brightness of the sunset,
the brightness of burning,
- The sparking of the fire, the brightness of burning, the brightness of burning,
- 42 For Peggy Patrick the right time to look at the *woorrangoo* is when the last rays of sun pass through the strings, re-creating the moment when the sun and the fire become one⁹. In the *joonba* song, the word *marrirri*, the "brightness of the sunset" is associated

with “dilirri” which describes the brightness of burning. This particular aesthetic made of the association of words, and the movements of the *woorango* manipulated by the performers, not only evokes the presence of the dead for the Kija but seduces the viewer into feeling it. It is important to State that one of the dancers was considered as the direct reincarnation of one of the murdered Aboriginal stockman¹⁰.

- 43 Digging deeper into this painting / performance relation and keeping in mind that the paintings are extensions of the earlier *woorrango*, I will go back to the use of the painted boards during a ceremony.
- 44 A gestural experiment, observed while documenting the creation of a new *joonba* at the newly built Jirrawun Studio in Wyndham in April 2007, helped me understanding the relation between painting and performance. The sequence was referring to a song about the establishment of the first Jirrawun artist camp in the remote outstation of Rugun (Crocodile Hole) in 1998.
- 45 After several hours of recording songs for the *joonba*, the two main owners of the *joonba*, Phyllis Thomas and Peggy Patrick, started to initiate moves involving paintbrushes. A large painting on canvas was used as a screen. The two women come around from behind the painting, and danced slowly, one hand behind their back, and the other holding a brush, gently striking the air in a vertical movement. Each step on the ground was accompanied by a paintbrush movement going up and down.
- 46 This move was repeated during the entire sequence creating an invisible link between “stamping the ground” and using a stick or a brush to put a mark on the canvas. Footsteps on the ground and painted dots on canvas converge in the same intention of marking a surface whether it is ceremonial ground or canvas.
- 47 When this *joonba* was first performed in the small community of Bow River, the singers used their clap-stick not only directed the dancers, but also to mark on the ground (indirectly). Paintings made this inscriptive dimension of the dance visible.
- 48 If you consider ceremonial ground as a two dimensional plan on a bird eye view during a performance, the footsteps of the dancers would appear as a series of double lines of dots formed by the dancers’ feet. The lines come out from each side of the bush screen, joint in the center of the space, and continue on a straight line towards the group of singers. Then they performed the same trajectory on the way back.
- 49 The lines left on the ground make an intriguing design, very similar to the one that structure the paintings on boards or canvas and depict the landscape: dreaming path, rivers, hills, mountains, roads, fences, etc...
- 50 The irregular texture of paintings made of natural pigments also echoes the red dusty ground of a ceremonial space; its rectangular shape also reminds us of a canvas. Visually, the structural elements of a painting and performance have similarities, they mirror each other.
- 51 The position of the dancing board, carried on the dancers' shoulders, towering over their heads, is a key element. The multiple correspondences between the horizontal and vertical plans or surfaces (steps and dots, ground and canvas) become visible by the act of holding the board vertically. The paintings on boards reveal vertically the images of what is inscribed on the ground, like a mirror would.
- 52 The *joonba* is a display (or “mise en scène”) of the entanglement of horizontal and vertical space, between the surface of the ground and the surface of the board,

combined through the performer's body. This creates a shift or motion from the steps to the dots and from the dots to the steps, creating depth out of two flat surfaces.

- 53 From this we can conclude that the paintings are not mere ritual representations of a place but they are also an image of the ritual itself, the ritual in its temporal dimension as an event. This particular event superposes and creates connections between at least three types of temporality: mythical, historical and biographical. The paintings show the image of a movement, a performance, the process of inscribing memory into a landscape. Through its formal and conceptual relation with the performance, the East Kimberley painting brings together the visual AND temporal aspect of an imprint, trace or landmark.
- 54 The painting makes visible the superposition of the temporalities that appears in a performance where people bring together ancestors, their collective history, and personal or biographical subjectivity as performers. As a type of performative “residues” of past events the East Kimberley artworks create a complex temporal space that can be considered as a new form of counter-narrative and demonstrates the profound historicity of indigenous contemporary art.

NOTES

1. Lommel Andreas, *The Unambal, A tribe in North West Australia*, (trad Ian Campbell), Takarakka Nowan Kas Publication, Carnarvon Gorge, 1997:23. (*Die Unambal, ein Stamm in Nordwest-Australien*. Museum für Völkerkunde, Hambourg, 1952) (Lommel).
2. Ryan Judith, *Images of Power : Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley*, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 1993:40.
3. Thomas Rover, Akerman Kim, Macha Mary, Christensen Will, and Caruana Wally, Roads Cross, *The Paintings of Rover Thomas*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1994, p. 26.
4. Melbourne Festival and the Neminuwarlin Performance Group in partnership with Jirrawun Aboriginal Arts, *Fire Fire Burning Bright*, Programme produced by Nuance Multimedia, Melbourne, 2002, pp.9.
5. “Blood on the Spinifex” exhibition 2002, curated by Tony Oliver at the Ian Potter Centre in Melbourne, presented a selection of works by Jirrawun artists that depict similar stories.
6. ‘Emu Dreaming 2003’ was initially chosen by the musée du quai Branly in Paris to be reproduced on the facade of the Building as part of the Australian Indigenous Art Commission inaugurated in 2006. It was finally replaced by a different painting a few months before the opening. Also see Morvan Arnaud, ‘Retour d’exotismes. La présence des artistes aborigènes en France.’, in B. Glowczewski & R. Henry (eds), *Le Défi Indigène*, Aux Lieux d’Etre éditions, Paris, 2007, pp 125-149.
7. Gell Alfred., *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 95. See Also Layard John, “Maze -Dances and the ritual of the labyrinth in Malekula”, *Folklore*, 47, pp. 123 70.
8. Peggy Patrick, interview with the author, 2007. See also Lommel, 1997, p. 81.
9. P. Patrick, interview with the author, 2007.

10. See also Morvan Arnaud, « Performing landscape and memory. Kija local and global art circulation », in Anderson, J. (ed.) *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, Melbourne, Miegunyah/University of Melbourne Press, 2009 : 827. Morvan Arnaud, « Traces en mouvement : histoire, mémoire et rituel dans l'art kija contemporain du Kimberley oriental », Unpublished PhD thesis, Paris/Melbourne, 2010.

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