

© Hilary Furlong. Hilary lived on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands and was the Coordinator of the Art Centre at Ernabella for nine years before moving to Alice Springs in 2008.

Tjungu nintiringanyi munu kunpu kanyini

learning together, staying strong

An art centre has operated continuously at Ernabella since 1948, and it is the oldest such Indigenous art studio and business in Australia. Artists have achieved world-wide recognition for their hand-loomed woollen textiles, paintings, limited edition prints on paper, ceramics, and perhaps most notably for their batik.

In the thirty nine years the artists have been making batik it has become their signature art form.

Ernabella is in the extreme north west of South Australia, 440 kilometers south west of Alice Springs. *Anangu* that is people in general, and now by common usage the Indigenous people of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, have lived on this country for tens of thousands of years and continue to do so. They speak Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara, languages that are part of the Western Desert linguistic group.

Only four years before the Second World War, that is in living memory, in an effort to help these people cope with the increasing and unwanted intrusions of European activity in their country and lives, the Presbyterian Board of Missions, chivvied by the redoubtable expatriate Scottish surgeon Charles Duguid, acquired the recently granted Ernabella pastoral lease. In 1937 it began the first permanent settlement, the Ernabella Mission, to act as a buffer between Anangu who still lived fully nomadic traditional hunter-gatherer lives, and European inroads from the south, east and north. The Mission offered medical attention and education which were provided freely to Anangu and not as a *quid pro quo* for accepting Christianity and renouncing their culture. Ernabella was unusual as a mission in that traditional Indigenous culture was deeply respected and valued. Gradually Anangu chose to stay permanently at Ernabella, or leave their children for schooling while they went back to the bush, some families as far as Blackstone/Papulankutja in Western Australia.

The school began in 1940. The first teacher, himself being taught Pitjantjatjara by his pupils, gave the children their first drawing books and pastels and pencils. In his halting Pitjantjatjara he told them to "Walkatjara kura kura" intending to encourage them to draw freely, or however they wanted; what he said actually translates as "draw badly"! Those same children, now old people, still remember that injunction and laugh about it. The children made graceful curvilinear marks almost certainly influenced by the practice of *milpatjunanyi*¹ - telling stories in the sand, which is exclusively a practice of girls and women but seen by both sexes and all ages.

¹ *Milpa* is the word for the flexible but strong, short stick, and nowadays mostly a piece of bent soft wire, which is used to beat a rhythm while with the other hand the storyteller makes *walka*/iconographic and other meaningful marks, illustrating aspects of the narrative she is relating. Sometimes gum leaves and sticks are used additionally as part of the illustration. These ephemeral story tellings are ways that girls and women still tell each other what is going on: the daily gossip. Out bush and in community I observe that within minutes of sitting down – on the sandy ground – a woman or a girl will start making marks. Such mark making which in previous decades was often described by non-Indigenous observers as “doodling” was and is both intentional and meaningful.

In pre-contact days *milpatjunanyi* would often be related, or indeed performed, in the evening as the extended family group was settling down for sleep: one senior woman would start telling *tjukurpa*/story as everyone was dozing off. These *milpatjunanyi* were like (European) bed time stories, as senior artists Nura Rupert, Tjariya (Nungalka) Stanley and Alison Carroll explained to me. These narratives were “open”, that is both sexes and all ages could listen to the story. Thus children heard some elements of the law/lore of which, as they matured and took on their adult responsibilities, obligations, and knowledge, the deeper secret/sacred levels of meaning, the *Tjukurpa*, would be fully revealed to them.

Many of these unique drawings survived and are now among the State Library of South Australia's and Flinders University Art Museum's treasures.

The only mark making these school children would have seen at that age would have been *milpatjunanyi*; *inmaku walka*/marks drawn on bodies for public *inma*/ceremonial dancing (as compared with secret/ sacred ritual events); and mark making on the roofs and walls of caves.

A few years ago Pantjiti Lionel now in her seventies, and who started painting only in 2002, produced a small gem on which I commented as she made it, both because of the colours – pinks and mauve greys, as well as white, black, grey and yellow. She explained that the *walka*/the meaningful or intentional marks, was her recollection of the “painting” that her father had done on a cave roof during some wet weather (very infrequent and thus doubly memorable) as a way of not only instructing the children who were sheltering there with him but also to entertain them. The apparently abstract to Western eyes, and perhaps better described as iconographic markings, were about getting *kuka*/meat (hunting for it) and cooking it. The colours she explained had been made by using wood ash (white and grey) dead coals (black) and mixing blood with the white ash to make pink and an even deeper maroon; the yellow was ochre.

Originally however neither painting nor batik was a primary occupation of Ernabella artists. In 1948 the mission began a "craft room" to provide income and to give training and work for the girls and women while the men built houses, fences, and the Ernabella church; sunk bores; and learnt to look after the 5,000 head of sheep whose wool paid for much of the mission's running expenses. Women already had a millennia-old tradition of spinning a thread, using human and animal fur to make small objects such as arm, head and waist bands for men and women. The ready supply of free wool led to the introduction of hand-loom and thus the first twenty eight years of "craft room" work was almost entirely devoted to working with wool, in weaving and making hand-pulled woollen floor rugs - now collectors' items. Many years later in 1974 as the Mission was finishing its work at Ernabella, with great prescience the legendary Winifred Hilliard, “craft room adviser” for thirty two years (1954-1986) had the business incorporated first as Ernabella and Fregon Arts, and in 1975 as Ernabella Arts Inc. The logo which was carefully chosen then remains: the traditional Pitjantjatjara spindle, in recognition of those early “craft room” years, and much earlier.

The first paintings made in the 1950s were mainly small, jewel-like cards and book marks in gouache colours using and developing traditional iconographic markings. A particular regional painting style gradually evolved over decades which some artists later referred to as *anapalayaku walka*/the style of painting of Ernabella. (*Walka*/meaningful mark, e.g. the mark on a bird's wing; a freckle; the marks made on the body for *inma*/ceremony; and also now translates as drawing, pattern, design, style, blueprint etc, and also word.) From the beginning artists had access to the full European palette of colours and the best available paints, brushes, papers and canvas. Co-ordinators, especially Winifred Hilliard, were careful not to tell people what to paint, but only how to use the materials to their best advantage.

Artists later worked on larger Masonite boards and paper, enlarging the same traditional markings. A series of such panels were made for the Ernabella church by the “craft room” artists. The influence from places like Papunya of using densely dotted surfaces also had an effect on some Ernabella painters from the mid-1980s. One artist and her husband,² also an established painter who had spent some time living in Alice Springs observing “dot” paintings being made and sold there, together brought the “dot” style back to Ernabella. Mostly however, the fully developed Ernabella style was characterised by a sweeping curvilinear line, richly coloured and almost graphic.³ The underlying format was typically a diagonal cross with the same detail

² The late Michael Atira Atira and his widow then Tjulkiwa, now Witjula Kunmanara.

³ In my view, the fact that Ernabella artists were given the best brushes the Mission could afford and that these were *tapered and of small sizes: 0-3*, is also relevant to the development of the Ernabella style, just as much as the ages of the artists or their isolation from other contemporaneous central Australian painting movements. When the

repeated in each corner and a central device, usually concentric circles, which is the *walka* for many associated things and concepts: camping place, fire, water, rock hole holding water, gathering of people; primary elements for life, and the living of it. A repeat pattern frequently complex and highly detailed, was made within the four triangles thus delineated. Subject matter was mostly confined to bush foods, or *walka* with no apparent overt narrative or other meaning – for those unable to make the connections.

The majority of people working in the art centre when it began in 1948 were not long from school and for at least the next three decades were younger women. Their ages, and their particular personal social position within their culture determined what *walka* they chose to make; and these were significant factors in the development of the so-called Ernabella style. Young (women) artists did not and do not paint *Tjukurpa*, the stories of the eternal and ever-present Creation. They could however and still do allude in their work in all mediums to *Tjukurpa* with which they are personally connected. For example, but not at all alone in this practice, the late Kunmanara Tapaya frequently used *kampurarpa*/bush tomatoes as a motif, or as the whole subject of a work.⁴ *Kampurarpa* are a central element of the Kutungu story, *Tjukurpa* which was part of this artist's being through family descent – as all *Anangu* know.

The so-called Ernabella style, which some artists who had worked in the Ernabella art centre took with them as they settled the other communities that gradually formed across the Lands in the 1960s and 1970s, was and is fascinating from an historic, cultural, aesthetic and social point of view. In today's Indigenous art market place it is almost completely unsellable, at least at a price that makes this painting style financially sustainable.

Faced with this problem when I began working for Ernabella Arts Inc. and coincident both with one of the cyclic “lows” in market place interest in textiles as fine art and an increasing even voracious, demand for Indigenous painting, it was clear to me that Ernabella artists' survival depended on a rapid introduction of financially viable art forms and a re-consideration by the artists of what and how they were painting. Among other ventures, this stark fact led to the establishment of the Ernabella Arts ceramic studio; greatly increased limited edition print-making; and developments of batik as a medium for applied design.

My then colleague Tracey-Lea Smith at Amata's Minymaku (now Tjala) Arts was facing similar financial problems and working with many artists who had learnt to use paint and brushes at Ernabella decades before and still painted in the same *anapalayaku walka* tradition.

In July and October 2002 we had two workshops with Tracey-Lea⁵ to help the artists think about form and placement. In the first the artists spent half a week using charcoal and working on huge sheets of butchers' paper. The work was discussed among everyone and interesting elements were transposed and enlarged on yet more butchers' paper. Diagonal cross formats and “corners” *wiya!*/No! – advice received with much laughter but some doubting expressions. Then we moved on to paint but only in black and white; quite a challenge for artists who were used to reflecting a landscape of intense, vivid, deeply saturated colours. It was thrilling to be a witness as the artists variously “got it”.

Typically several artists would work together similar to the days nearly fifty years earlier when as girls and young women they had worked together on hand-pulled woollen rugs. We also gave people much larger canvases than usual, and much bigger, non-tapered brushes.

A serendipitous co-incidence at that moment brought back into the art centre women who

artists did come to re-consider their painting techniques from 2002 onwards it was difficult for them to see the advantages of using square cut brushes size 8 and above. Even now when starting on a large format piece of say 1m square or more, an artist will often first choose a tapered end very small size brush although it is not best suited to the work.

⁴ Personal comment from the artist informing me about a painting she was doing at the time.

⁵ Tracey-Lea, who was an ex-visual art student as well as the grand-daughter and grand-niece of much loved Ernabella missionaries, had also spent the previous four years helping Amata artists re-establish their art centre and incorporate it. She was the ideal colleague to assist us at Ernabella.

were now in their late sixties and seventies and who had not worked as artists for more than forty years, if ever. They had all participated for the first time and with spectacular success and great public appreciation in that year's Alice Springs Beanie Festival. They came back from Alice Springs the day before the first painting workshop expecting to go on making *mukata*/beanies, only to discover charcoal thrust in their hands and a big sheet of paper before them. These elderly women had not been influenced by years of painting with fine brushes and now because of their ages they were not constrained in the kinds of *walka* they could use; if they chose to refer directly and overtly to aspects of *Tjukurpa* their seniority and social status enabled them to do that. Three years later several senior men, Harry Tjutjuna, Rama Sampson and Dickie Mininytiri chose to join the women and to work at Ernabella Arts Inc. where they have their own painting room.

At the second workshop with Tracey-Lea we introduced colour, albeit a relatively limited palette: red, yellow, blue and brown. If the artists wanted something different they had to mix it themselves from what was there. Over the next few years more colours were put out and nowadays a full colour range is freely available.

At the end of 2002 at Araluen Centre for Arts and Entertainment in Alice Springs the artists showed their new work in deliberately named *Mina Wala: fresh like water from a spring*. In 2004 at Flinders University Art Museum City Gallery in Adelaide one of the early large black and white collaborative works was the signature piece in *Manta Atunymangkatja/Looking After Country*, and acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia. Tracey-Lea has come back to work in the art centre and in bush camps on several occasions since then, and "new idea" as the artists first described the way they paint now has become almost second nature.

The difficulties in making batik production pay its way were different from the necessary innovations in acrylic painting. Winifred Hilliard has described⁶ how in 1968 she came up with the idea of batik as a possible development for the Ernabella artists. The outstandingly fine weaving was not really economic to produce and besides, she was always under extreme pressure⁷ from the very beginning until the end of her employment to make the "craft room" work not simply pay its way but to make a profit.

Batik making finally began in 1971 when a young American, Leo Brereton, who had studied the technique in Indonesia was paid by the Mission Board to teach it at Ernabella for two months. His visit however was shorter, since as Deaconess Hilliard writes⁸, he was quoted as saying that the artists learnt in one month as much as he had learnt in three in Indonesia. In early 1975 three artists, Jillian Davey, Nyukana Baker, and Carol and Tjimpuna's mother went to the Batik Research Institute in Yogyakarta. Later the same year the Danish batik artist Vivianne McClintock née Bertelsen visited. Vivianne had also studied batik in Indonesia and she was able to help with better waxes; to re-supply *canting* the little spouted pourers used to apply the batik design in wax; naphthol/azoic and permanent indigosol dyes; and advise on improved methods of wax removal. From that time onwards batik which was already popular, really came into its own at Ernabella. Again Hilliard recalled⁹: "The degree to which batik became Ernabella's own medium is demonstrated by the interest shown by the whole community, by the enthusiasm of some who had shown no previous interest in creative work, and by the visits of some artists to other communities to teach their friends and relatives."¹⁰

There was no possibility, at least not for me when I began work at Ernabella, of suggesting to the artists they give up their preferred occupation of batik in favour of painting,

⁶ In *Warka Irititja munu Kuwari Kutu/Work from the Past and Present: a celebration of fifty years of Ernabella Arts*, Louise Partos (ed.) Ernabella Arts Inc. 1998; and *Raiki Wara Long Cloth from Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Strait*, Judith Ryan, Robyn Healy, National Gallery of Victoria 1998.

⁷ Personal communication on numerous occasions on this subject.

⁸ op.cit.

⁹ op.cit.

¹⁰ These included places outside the APY Lands: Utopia, Docker River and Arnhem Land.

which in any case was not then a viable financial option. Making batik, and continuing to make it with world-wide artistic acclaim if not comparative success to acrylic painting, was one of the things that made Ernabella artists special; not only were they proud and happy about it, it was obvious that the artists loved doing batik. On average twenty three people arrived for a full day's work every day, and sixteen of those were batik artists. The sweet smell of melting bees' wax would rise in the air as the artists turned on their frypans, settled down on their floor cushions in kinship clusters, shook out a scarf or silk length from their work baskets and anchored each end on their work tables with a sand-weighted, specially kept powdered milk tin. Then silence, soon a kind of reverie, broken only by soft *Tjukurpa* singing as everyone turned to their batik cloth.

It infuriated me that I couldn't sell a major piece of batik for what I thought it was worth: many thousands of dollars; for work by artists who were supreme practitioners in a medium they had been practicing continuously for thirty years. It surely could not be that Ernabella batik would become "less than the dust beneath the chariot wheels" of commerce¹¹? There was a brief fillip in 2000 when the Art Gallery of New South Wales shop ordered several hundred scarves to be available for their landmark Papunya Tula exhibition synchronous with the Sydney Olympic Games. In three months the artists made the equivalent of three years output of scarves at their then production rate.

Three things helped to enable the on-going central position of batik in the creative life of Ernabella artists. The first was a commission from the State Library of South Australia to provide an art work for the \$41m Spence Wing extension to the Library, arising from the Ernabella artists' gift to the Library of the miraculously re-discovered children's drawings from the 1940s and 1950s. This led to the use of batik as the medium for applied design in the manufacture of three "monumental" hand tufted rugs and an on-going relationship with Tai Ping Rugs and Carpets, the China-based international company and their Australian agents Korda Brothers, and the commission co-ordinator Pamille Berg. Since then Pamille has overseen similar commissions for Ernabella from Aldo Giurgola architect of Australia's Parliament House, for his own house; and for the Canberra headquarters of three federal government head offices. These commissions have demonstrated the attraction and marketability of batik in applied design and given the artists great experience in understanding and working to a design brief – both valuable learning curves.

The second quite unplanned and so doubly fortuitous development was using batik as the decoration technique on the vase and other terracotta forms which, since 2003, have established the Ernabella ceramic studio. Nyukana Baker who pioneered this application, Milyika (Alison) Carroll, Tjariya (Nungalka) Stanley, Tjunkaya Tapaya and Carol Williams all have had prize winning, and major exhibition and acquisitions successes in using the technique.

The final piece of the batik financial puzzle fell into place when we found the proper marketing outlet. The objective reality is that batik like any other fine art, has a niche market. The trick is getting into the niche. For us that has been the specialist and special business The Fabric of Life in Adelaide owned and run by Mary Jose, one of Australia's leading textile scholars and conservators. Since 2003 we have shown twice a year at The Fabric of Life with an enormous upswing in batik revenue as well as extremely important sales made to major institutions around Australia and overseas.

Without doubt I have learnt together with the Ernabella artists as well as from them – invaluable lessons. I see they stayed true to their deepest selves and their work stayed beautiful and strong: *tjungu nintiringanyi munu kunpu kanyini*/ learning together, staying strong.

Hilary Furlong

Co-ordinator Ernabella Arts Inc. 1999-2006

¹¹ For an all too rare Australian critique of the tensions between art and commerce, see What is *Wrong* with Contemporary Art? Peter Timms, UNSW Press, 2004, especially pp 59-66 on Indigenous art.

