

ART INTO HEALTH: PUNTU PALYARRIKUWANPA

ABORIGINAL MEN BECOMING WELL



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Definition: Within this publication, the term 'Indigenous' is used to refer both to Aboriginal people and to Torres Strait Islanders.

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Paintings reproduced courtesy Dr Brian McCoy, the artists and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication could not have occurred without the generous contribution and involvement of the artists and their families. Three of the artists have died since contributing to this project, but all of the families involved have fully supported the showcasing the art and the publishing of their stories.

Thanks, also, to Mick Adams, Mark Wenitong and Alex Brown for their comments and contributions.

In addition, thanks to those who have sponsored this showcase: La Trobe University, the Lowitja Institute, the Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute (Central Australia), and the Mary MacKillop Foundation.

KEY TERMS

<i>Kartiya</i>	a non-Aboriginal person
<i>Kurrunpa</i>	spirit, life essence
<i>Ngurra</i>	camp, country, one's place
<i>Puntu</i>	an Aboriginal person
<i>Tjukurrpa</i>	Dreaming or Dreamtime (the original and ancestral period of present day society)
<i>Walytja</i>	relatives, family

MAP



1. Kururrungku (aka Billiluna, Mindibungu)
2. Malarn (aka Mulan, Lake Gregory)
3. Wirrimanu (aka Wirrumanu, Balgo Hills, Balgo Mission)
4. Tjukakarrinyu

5. Yaka Yaka: Mangkayi and Nyuntjun
6. Stansmore Range and Point Moody: Kurtal and Irrututu
7. Lake Mackay
8. Kiwirrkurra: Kaylwarra

FOREWORD: BRIAN MCCOY

This collection of art is unique. It is the first time that a group of Aboriginal men have offered, through art, their perspectives on their lives and wellbeing. Using contemporary techniques and methods, the artists present a wide range of narratives that link ancient ways of understanding and describing their world and their wellbeing today. The collection, therefore, provides an important and valuable body of knowledge about health.

These 15 paintings, created between 2002 and 2011 by older, middle-aged and younger men, contributed important perspectives to two research projects that focused on the health of men who live in the Kimberley of Western Australia*. While the artists share a number of different languages, they all live in the Kutjungka region, the semi-desert land south of Halls Creek in Western Australia.

The paintings provide meanings at a number of levels. Some are more immediately transparent, while others hold cultural meanings specific to men's Law, ceremonies and ancestral (*tjukurrpa*) or Dreaming connections with the land. What each artist painted, sometimes with the help of their wives and partners, was their choice. No particular theme or topic was sought or invited.

The artists described key values that affected their wellbeing: spirit (*kurrumpa*), relationships to land (*ngurra*), dreaming (*tjukurrpa*) and family (*walytja*). The land nurtured them and their people as it offered them health and spiritual meaning. It could also generate special powers that men could access to heal others.

The older artists revealed the importance of ancient stories and connections of meaning, particular to land and ceremony. The younger artists described some of the pressures on their lives: anger, stress, drugs and the need for male leadership. All the artists express in particular and personal ways, key aspects of their lives affected by culture, family, land and spirit.

This collection of art provides important information about the ways in which Aboriginal men today perceive their health and wellbeing and tells health stories that reveal how Aboriginal men have come, and continue to come, out of a strong and long tradition of healing. They seek to heal their people. Despite many challenges, they draw life, energy and spirit from their land, culture, family and ceremony to work together and make life better for their people.

DR BRIAN F MCCOY

Senior Research Fellow
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
La Trobe University

* Doctoral Research (The University of Melbourne), later published as *Holding Men: Kanyiminpa and the Health of Aboriginal Men* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008); Postdoctoral NHMRC Research: Developing, Sustaining and Evaluating Health Programs for Aboriginal Men (later published as a report, *Healing Men: Mariparra and the Health of Aboriginal Men* (2010).

COMMENTARY: MICK ADAMS

This unique collection of artwork presented by Aboriginal men from the Western Desert describes cultural relationships that connect men to land, ceremony and other men through the use of visual storytelling.

The artists' ability to describe the standpoint of their lives through this form of storytelling links ancient ways of understanding and describing an Aboriginal worldview with the use of contemporary art techniques.

This collection has provided an opportunity for men to work in partnership with their wives and other males or females not only to retain important knowledge but also to increase understanding about health and wellbeing. As cultural custodians of land, stories and ceremonies it is important for them to maintain the way these messages are relayed and passed on to future generations.

Traditionally, Aboriginal peoples embrace all phenomena and life as part of a vast and complex system of relationships which can be traced directly back to the ancestral Totemic Spirit Beings of the Dreaming. The Dreaming establishes the structures of society, rules for social behaviour, and the ceremonies performed to ensure continuity of life and land. The Dreaming governs the laws of community, cultural lore and how people are required to behave in their communities.

The artists reveal the importance of their connections to land, stories and ceremony. They also describe some of the pressures on their lives and how they wish to turn their lives around. The cry is for male leadership. All the artists convey their personal ways of maintaining particular key aspects of culture, family, land and spirit. As one father stated, he is 'proud of his sons, knowing they will pass on the Law to the next generations. When the old people pass away, these men will take over'.

As an Aboriginal man and artist, and as I look at this art and listen to their stories, I am reminded that as health professionals we tend to concentrate on utilising the equipment and techniques that we have learnt in the modern world. We seem to forget the traditional processes of connectedness, of being in tune with our spiritual wellbeing and using alternative ways of healing.

This artwork and their stories are very supporting and encouraging, particularly for the work that we do in improving the health and wellbeing of our males.

DR MICK ADAMS

Chair, Steering Committee 6th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Male Health Convention

Chair, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Male Health Leadership Group

Member, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, Andrology Australia

COMMENTARY: MARK WENITONG

Aboriginal men have always been involved in healing and art.

These Aboriginal male artists and their work speak to this ongoing cultural tradition with unique artistic expressions.

The value of this art is inherently part of the valuing of our Aboriginal men as men and as artists and healers.

Aboriginal men occupy a unique space in both modern and traditional society, and in this exhibition there is an opportunity to raise the issues faced by our men in artistic, social, cultural and political discussion.

In expressing these images of healing, culture and the pressures on them to continue to be the men they want to be, and the ways their world is different from the rest of Australia, they show us a glimpse of their lived experience: sometimes beautiful, sometimes harsh, sometimes confused. Always, I think, with the hope of full healthy, valued lives.

Viewers of this art must draw their own conclusions. They must also think about their own responses to the relationships and drama represented on the canvas.

Having seen this exhibition, whether you are an artist, an art appreciator, an Aboriginal man, a public servant, policy maker or politician, there is an inherent responsibility to respond to these paintings and stories, or just do nothing...

DR MARK WENITONG

Senior Medical Officer, Apunipima Cape York Health Council

Associate Professor (Adjunct), School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences, James Cook University, Cairns

COMMENTARY: ALEX BROWN

The plight of Indigenous Australians in terms of health status has been well documented. Across the life course, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most marginalised and disadvantaged, with Indigenous males experiencing the worst morbidity and mortality profile within Australian society. Yet this disadvantage remains poorly understood, and rarely dealt with.

Indigenous males are frequently described and labelled as the 'worst' of our national health and social statistics. Perpetuating negative stereotypes of 'problem males' has led to the development of health and social policy that continues to blame males, without providing the necessary support, infrastructure or political will to reverse disadvantage. Instead, we must understand and accept Aboriginal men as dynamic, essential elements of families, communities and societies.

To understand the health and wellbeing of males, one has to understand the historical, cultural, physiological, psychosocial, economical, environmental and political contexts in which they exist. To assume that Aboriginal men have no insight into both the causes and alleviation of community and individual ill-health is narrow-sighted. Aboriginal men have long recognised the significance of their loss of authority, self-esteem and self-respect through loss of culture, country and spiritual wellbeing. The suffering of Indigenous men and their families, through discrimination, racism, removal from families and dispossession from land have all played their part.

As a consequence, reversing health disadvantage requires an appreciation and harnessing of the strengths that already exist within Aboriginal men. Importantly, this unique collection of story, metaphor, culture,

ceremony, awareness and history, presented through art, encapsulates all that Aboriginal men can be, and the essential elements of a positive way forward. It articulates both the strengths of Aboriginal men, as a lived reality, as a basis for healing and as a basis for a positive future for our communities.

In essence, these works challenge the notion that health and wellbeing is not understood, nor coveted by Aboriginal men; it remains the central impulse of Aboriginal life. This impulse is to care for one another, to protect and celebrate ceremony and culture, to pass on generations of wisdom and learning and to maintain connection to country, family and law. These are the fundamental foundations of Aboriginal desert life and the central requirements of maintaining health and wellbeing across generations.

These fundamentals, outlined in this collection, guide Aboriginal life. They guide survival against adversity, mandate relationships, obligations and responsibilities to the pursuit of wellbeing. They support the role of Aboriginal customary practice, protecting even the most vulnerable against the difficulties of life. They mandate healthy environments, nutrition and a healthful way of life, spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally. This is the structure of Aboriginal wellbeing; an essential starting point for health and social policy development for our communities.

DR ALEX BROWN

Margaret Ross Chair in Indigenous Health
Baker IDI Central Australia



**PAINTINGS –
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ABORIGINAL MEN BECOMING WELL

01

THE RIGHT DECISION, 2009

George Lee Tjungurrayi (b. 1977)

Language Group: Kukatja**Medium:** Acrylic on board, 80 x 30 cm

Young men are caught everyday in making good and healthy decisions. They are balancing two cultures. They can find it hard and sometimes they give up. They feel being pulled two ways, trying to balance *Puntu* (Aboriginal) and *Kartiya* (non-Aboriginal) culture. The circles, from the top, describe a person's culture (*tjukurrpa*), family (*walytja*), oneself, country (*ngurra*) and spirit (*kurrumpa*). A man is always trying to balance all these things in his life. Around each circle there is energy seeking to find that balance.





02

KUTJULU MARRKUNIN – ONE MAN STOPPING, 2009

Daniel Yugumbari Tjakamarra (b. 1981)

Language Group: Kukatja

Medium: Acrylic on board, 75 x 60 cm

One man is trying to stop what is happening in the community. He is trying to help those who are sniffing petrol, drinking grog and those who are fighting. He speaks to the different groups and gets them to come together. He has done all those things in the past. Now he is trying to bring everyone together. He gets help from his family and friends. As he gets more experience his spirit gets stronger and more men follow his example.

03

**WUMURRINPA KUTJUNGKA
KULIKUWA WANGKA –
COMING TOGETHER TO
LISTEN, 2009**

Lindsay Gimme Rose Tjakamarra
(b. 1978)

Language Group: Kukatja and Walmajarri
Medium: Acrylic on board, 75 x 60 cm

Not all men ('u') are happy or well. Some have a spirit within them that is angry (red 'u' and footprints). It is hot and wild. They are not looking after their health. When they come together (large 'U') they sort it out. They sit down, listen to the old people and become healed of their anger. They think of their families and their children. But some men stay cranky and walk away, *Kartiya* (non Aboriginal, white 'u') and *Puntu* (Aboriginal, brown 'u'). They think about grog and going to town. They turn away. They do not want to come together with other men. However, many do come together. They like being with other men and finding ways to talk and share. Their anger can be healed. There are also *Kartiya* (non Aboriginal) men who are angry. They do not listen to the people and should go away.



04

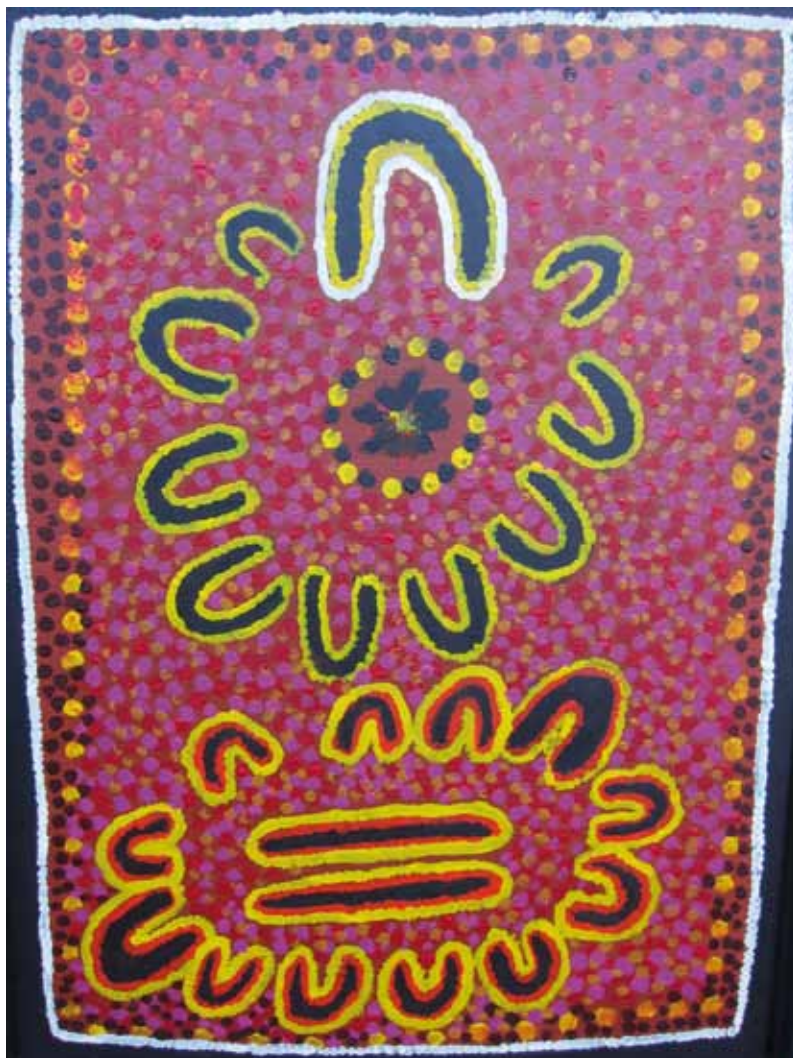
TJUKAKARRINYU, 2003

Jimmy Tchooga Tjapangarti
(b. 1951)

Language Group: Warlpiri and Ngarti

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

An older man is sitting around a fire with his sons (upper image), and the other young men he has 'grown up'. He has pride in his sons and has taught them about men's Law. They sit with him in men's Law (lower image). Through him, the ancestral Dreaming or *Tjukurrpa* has been passed down to them. He is proud of his sons, knowing they will pass on the Law to the next generations. When the old people pass away, these men will take over.





05

THE LIFE OF A YOUNG MAN, 2003

Lawrence Lulu Tjangala (b. 1981)

Language Group: Kukatja and Walmajarri

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

These are the main things in my life as a young man. They are church (upper left), education and learning (upper centre), football (upper right), men's Law ceremonies (lower left), drinking and smoking (lower centre) and hunting (lower right). As I get older I drink less grog. There is now gunjah in my community. All my life I will go hunting and fishing and will have respect for our men's ceremonies.



06

PALYALARNI, 2002

Joey Helicopter Tjungurrayi (b. 1947)

Language Group: Kukatja

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

A person has come to a *maparn* (healer) to be made well. The three white circles are people: the person who is sick, the *maparn* and the person who has been made well. They sit between two lines or rows of *tali* (sandhills, the red horizontal lines). The green circles are the different communities of the region, and the country is full of bush tucker (yellow). *Palyalarni* (make me well), the sick person asks the *maparn*, and the *maparn* cleans the inside of the person's body. In this case the person has a 'runny tummy' from eating too much bush food, such as *kumpupatja* (bush tomato) or *kantjilyi* (bush raisins). The person has become well, *palyarringu*.



07

TRAVELLING MAPARN, 2002

Fabian Polly Tjapanangka (b. 1974)

Language Group: Kukatja

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

One summer, the Sturt River came up and prevented *maparn* (male healers) from two of the desert communities, Wirrimanu and Malarn, travelling to a third community, Kururrungku, to heal someone who was sick. They had been asked to come as there were no *maparn* available in that community. *Maparn* can take 'lids' out of people, which are like shells, or *warta* (small sticks) or *yakirri*, which is like wool. If *yakirri* is in you it is like someone having a fishing line and someone pulling you. If you break it you'll be all right. There are also things like charcoal, which make people weak, but are not the same as fire charcoal. My father (my father's brother) gave me this *maparn*; my father and my mother have their own *maparn*. When you are a baby they put it in you, like a gift, in the guts. They say 'look after people!'



08

FATHER AND SON MAPARN, 2002

Bill Doonday Tjampitjin (b. 1936)

Language Group: Ngalia and Warlpiri

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

This older *maparn* (healer) travelled the Northern Territory and Kimberley as a young stockman. He is now a respected and experienced *maparn* who has been asked by *Puntu* (Aboriginal people) from the region to go to regional and interstate hospitals and heal family members when they have been seriously ill. In this painting he describes the land around Mangkayi where his father Nguri received his *maparn* skills and passed them onto him. There is also the story of a man who once went there to get *maparn* powers, so that evil spirits would no longer frighten him.



09

MALARN COUNTRY, 2002

Rex Johns Pungarpa Tjapangarti (1944 – 2004)

Language Group: Walmajarri

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

This painting describes the land around the community of Malarn describing the creeks and tracks and also the Dreaming or *Tjukurrpa* sites nearby. They include the *Wati Kutjorra* (Two Men), *Kunyarrpa* (Dingo) and *Kalangarra* (Blue-Tongue Lizard). The artist brought his Walmajarri people back to live on their land at Paruku (Lake Gregory) in 1979.



10

This is the country around Nyuntjun. There is bush tucker, creeks and caves. In these caves there is a strong men's Law. Here, men can receive *maparn* powers to be able to heal those who are sick.

NYUNTJUN, 2003

Peter Talkurna Tjakamarra (b. 1933)

Language Group: Kukatja and Jaru

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm



11

MAPARN, 2003

Flakie Stevens Tjampitjin (b. 1951)

Language Group: Kukatja

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

A sick person, covered in *murtu* (red ochre) has been brought by a family to the *maparn* (healer) to be cured. The people are surrounded by *tali* (sandhills). His hand has touched the sick person and healed them. *Kinyu*, (a dog *Tjukurrpa* or Dreaming spirit) accompanies him and helps him as he works.



12

**NGAPAKURLANGU –
LIGHTNING DREAMING, 2003**

Fred Tjakamarra (1926–2005)

Language Group: Ngarti and Warlpiri
Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

Lightning came from the east. There was no rain falling. It came and stopped inside a cave at Kurtal. This was during the time of the Tjukurrpa. It is the site that is shared between the *Tjakamarra/Nakamarra* and the *Tjapangarti/Napangarti* kinship groups. In this *Tjukurrpa* and Dreaming place, people can receive special 'rainmaker' powers.



13

IRRUTUTU, 2003

Titji Ross Tjampitjin (b. 1950)

Language Group: Kukatja and Pintupi

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

This painting describes the sand hills and caves at Kaylwarra, country west of Kiwirrkurra. This is a special *kunyarr* (dog) *Tjukurpa* and Dreaming site. An old lady lives here and she is 'boss' for these many dogs. She watches over them. It is a dangerous place. The dogs can chase, bite and eat people who come to that country.



14

MY STORY, 2003

Brendan Ross Tjangala (1981–2007)

Language Group: Kukatja

Medium: Acrylic on board, 45 x 60 cm

In my first story (left) I used to get into trouble, around 15 years of age. I got involved in petrol sniffing, alcohol, girls and gunjah. One of my friends was walking with me when I got into trouble. He then turned back. Another turned around and came with me. I ended up in prison. When I was young I faced many dangers: car accidents, petrol sniffing, alcohol and imprisonment. In the second story (middle) I am a bit older. One of my older friends, and one *Kartiya* (non Aboriginal) friend, told me to leave all that trouble behind. I turned around and walked with them. In my last story (right), I am now married. I have a wife and daughter and we are walking together. I now have a future.

15

FINDING THE BALANCE, 2011

George Lee Tjungurrayi (b. 1977)

Language Group: Kukatja**Medium:** Acrylic on linen, diameter 90 cm

A man (centre circle) is surrounded by four important values in his life – *tjukurrpa* (culture), *kurrumpa* (spirit), *ngurra* (country) and *walytja* (family). Together, these values keep him well as he can feel himself being pulled in many directions. He is living in two worlds: the *Kartiya* (non-Aboriginal) world, the grey representing concrete, and his Aboriginal world (the brown representing the land). The two snakes are the two forces trying to work within him to find that balance between two ways of living. The yellow and red of the two snakes is their energy inside him (the four values) and outside (*Kartiya* values). These forces are trying to come together as one. Sometimes he finds that balance. When he cannot find that balance he can feel lost.





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