

Secret Maps And Sacred Landscapes: The Phillips Presents 68 Spectacular Artworks By Aboriginal Women



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In the Northern Territory of Australia, home to the Anmatyerre people, the bush plum is considered a delicacy. But knowing where bush plums grow is not only a matter of eating well. Bush plums are also the fruit of creation, providing the Anmatyerre with a sacred connection to their ancestors and the spiritual origins of their country.

So it's tricky to explain the paintings of Anmatyerre artist Angelina Pwerle. With their fine networks of dots on monochrome red or black backdrops, they can be said to depict bush plum plants and also to map territorial geography in terms of where the fruit can be found, while simultaneously representing songlines and ceremonies that outsiders will never know. For visitors to the [Phillips Collection](#), where a selection of Pwerle's paintings are included in a spectacular exhibition of contemporary art by Aboriginal women, there's a vast abyss separating the painter's world and viewers' perceptions.



Yukultji Napangati: *Accepted Women at Murrumbidgee*, 2007. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 60 1/4 x 40 in.

The same holds true for the paintings of Yukultji Napangati, a Pintupi artist whose canvases are covered in wavering lines that make vibrant patterns in aggregate. As with Pwerle's bush plum canvases, there's a level at which these works are cartographic, mapping the sand hills surrounding Napangati's native territory. Simultaneously they're landscapes, depicting the hills' curvy shapes. Yet the titles of these paintings – such as *Women's Ceremonies at Marrapinti* – make clear that the landscapes are active, and the pictures simultaneously represent unknown ceremonial dynamics.

For an American viewer, one tendency may be to assimilate Aboriginal paintings by comparison to familiar Western works with similar optical effects. (Pwerle's bush plums may evoke Monet's lilies; Napangati's ceremonial landscapes might bring to mind the op-art of Bridget Riley.) An alternate tendency may entail exoticizing the paintings, exalting their Aboriginal otherness.

While both responses are understandable, neither of these reactions does the paintings justice. Like all great art, they demand that spectators really look at them while being fully present in their midst. For an American, that means an acknowledgment of otherness without relinquishing a personal response.



Though very different, the paintings of Pwerle and Napangati are both striking because they activate many simultaneous levels of observation. Some of those layers undoubtedly come from the outback of Australia. Others are latent in each viewer.

*I am a critic and artist, most recently the author of "You Belong to the Universe: Buckminster Fuller and the Future" and "Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Age", both published by Oxford University Press. My conceptual art has been exhibited at museums and galleri... **MORE***

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