

The Wall Street Journal, September 24, 2015

CITY NEWS A20, A21 | SPACES A22 | HEARD & SCENE A23 | SPORTS A25, A26

GREATER NEW YORK



Art That Translates

Aboriginal painter hits Manhattan **URBAN GARDNER | A20**



Film Festival's First Looks
ARTS | A24

MARK ABRAMSON FOR WSJ

THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY

WSJ.com/NY ***** THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. Thursday, September 24, 2015 | **A19**

CITY NEWS

Out of the Outback, Into the Big City

Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri didn't so much shake my hand as allow me to handle his.

"They adjust to it," explained Fred Myers of our customs. An anthropologist at New York University, Prof. Myers was serving as Mr. Tjapaltjarri's translator. "They know that white people do that."

I was operating in a near total information vacuum when it came to Australia's aboriginal people. Mr. Tjapaltjarri ranks as one of their most important artists, and a show of his



URBAN GARDNER
RALPH GARDNER JR.

work is on display at Salon 94 in the Bowery through Oct. 24. It's better, to my unpracticed eye, and certainly more beautiful than 90% of what passes for contemporary art these days.

I had no idea what Mr. Tjapaltjarri's native language was, but assumed it might be English. He comes from Australia, after all.

"Pintupi," Prof. Myers said. "It's not a written language so it's a little hard to learn. You can't take lessons."

Mr. Tjapaltjarri, who is believed to be in his early 60s, and his family made headlines in 1984 when they came into contact with outsiders for the first time, part of a "lost tribe" of nomadic hunters. "It was very isolated," Prof. Myers said of their homeland. "They were living about 700 kilometers west of Alice Springs."

I had no idea where Alice Springs was either.

"The center of Australia," Prof. Myers added helpfully. "They were among the last people in Australia to be living as hunters and gatherers. It's a very harsh desert."

While Mr. Tjapaltjarri, a celebrated artist, had been on



Fred Myers and Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri with one of the artist's paintings, and a catalog of works by aboriginal artists.

MARK ARADSKIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)



a plane before, this was his first visit to New York, or anywhere outside Australia. My idea was that we take a stroll around the neighborhood, though I'm not sure the Bowery is necessarily indicative of the splendors of our city.

Someone had said that Mr. Tjapaltjarri enjoyed sweets and suggested we go for ice cream. This information turned out to utterly and completely incorrect.

I always try to find something, anything, the person I'm interviewing and I have in common. I realized it might be more of a challenge in this case. But I thought we might share a passion for Cadbury Daily Milk chocolate bars or Fry's Turkish Delight, since I understand such products are readily available in Australia.

"They're big meat eaters," Prof. Myers said. "If they have a choice they'd rather have meat."

"Kangaroo," added Paul Sweeney, who represents Papunya Tula Artists, Mr. Tjapaltjarri's community arts center, and is himself from Alice Springs. "Emu. They hunt feral cats."

"Feral cats?"
"They're quite ferocious."

In any case, it quickly became apparent that the artist wasn't up for a stroll. This seemed the result, in approximately equal parts, of jet lag, culture shock, and genial resignation.

"They're trusting," Prof. Myers said.

The artist's family made contact with outsiders for the first time in 1984.

That morning they had visited the Top of the Rock observatory in Rockefeller Center.

While not as tall as the Empire State Building or the new observation deck at One World Trade Center—"Shorter lines," Mr. Sweeney pointed out—it was plenty tall enough, given the parched, flat landscape from which Mr. Tjapaltjarri hails. "It's sandhill country," Mr. Sweeney said. "You don't need to get high to see a long way."

What did the artist think of the view? "Crazy white folks taking photos," he said through his interpreters.

I would think Mr. Tjapaltjarri, as an artist, might enjoy a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art or the Museum of Modern Art, but neither was on the agenda.

"Generally speaking, things that aren't incredibly recognizable are a little hard to appreciate," Mr. Sweeney said. "They don't have exposure to it in their day-to-day lives."

While Mr. Tjapaltjarri's paintings, which range in price from \$25,000 to \$80,000, appear abstract, the subject matter is apparently quite specific—ancestral stories, the swirling sands of Australia's desert, the dotted body paint people decorate themselves with for sacred ceremonies.

"The paint reflects off the firelight and the movements get this strobe action, like Studio 54," Prof. Myers explained to me. "They identify that as ancestral power being brought into the present."

Dressed in jeans, sneakers, a cowboy hat, and a flowing beard and mustache, Mr. Tjapaltjarri looked not unlike some other sages I've seen walking around the Bowery.

The artist and his posse also hit Central Park. "They like the squirrels," Prof. Myers reported, although apparently not as a food source. "They don't have them in Australia."

"We're trying to keep him away from all the scary stuff," the anthropologist added.

I wondered what that might be.

"Escalators," Prof. Myers said.

Finally, something we had in common.

"Remember, it's a moving stair," Mr. Sweeney said.

I remind myself whenever I board one.

ralph.gardner@wsj.com

CORRECTIONS & AMPLIFICATIONS

The firms Arup and Icor Associates are part of a group developing plans for a high-rise residential building at 475 West 18th St. that would be constructed entirely of wood. An article on Sept. 17 about the use of engineered wood in Manhattan real-estate projects failed to name the firms as participants in the project and incorrectly gave the name of the project as 475 West.

Readers can alert The Wall Street Journal to any errors in news articles by emailing wsjcontact@wsj.com or by calling 888-410-2667.