

Diverse collection of Western Desert Indigenous art is dazzling

By Sasha Grishin

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***Western Desert Sublime: The Craig Edwards Gift to the ANU.* Various artists. ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton. Until December 16.**

This exhibition is part of a remarkable gift of 120 paintings by Western Desert artists that Craig Edwards, of the law firm Maliganis Edwards Johnson, made to the Australian National University. With an estimated value of over \$9 million, it is apparently the most valuable donation of its kind made to any university in Australia.



Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, *Untitled*, 2008, in *Western Desert Sublime: The Craig Edwards Gift to the ANU* at ANU Drill Hall Gallery.

Edwards began collecting Western Desert artists in 1994, at a time when male artists were dominant and had received national and international acclaim. Subsequently, more women artists began to emerge, many of them turning to painting on canvas late in life. This exhibition marks some of the highlights in Western Desert painting from the mid-1990s through to the present.

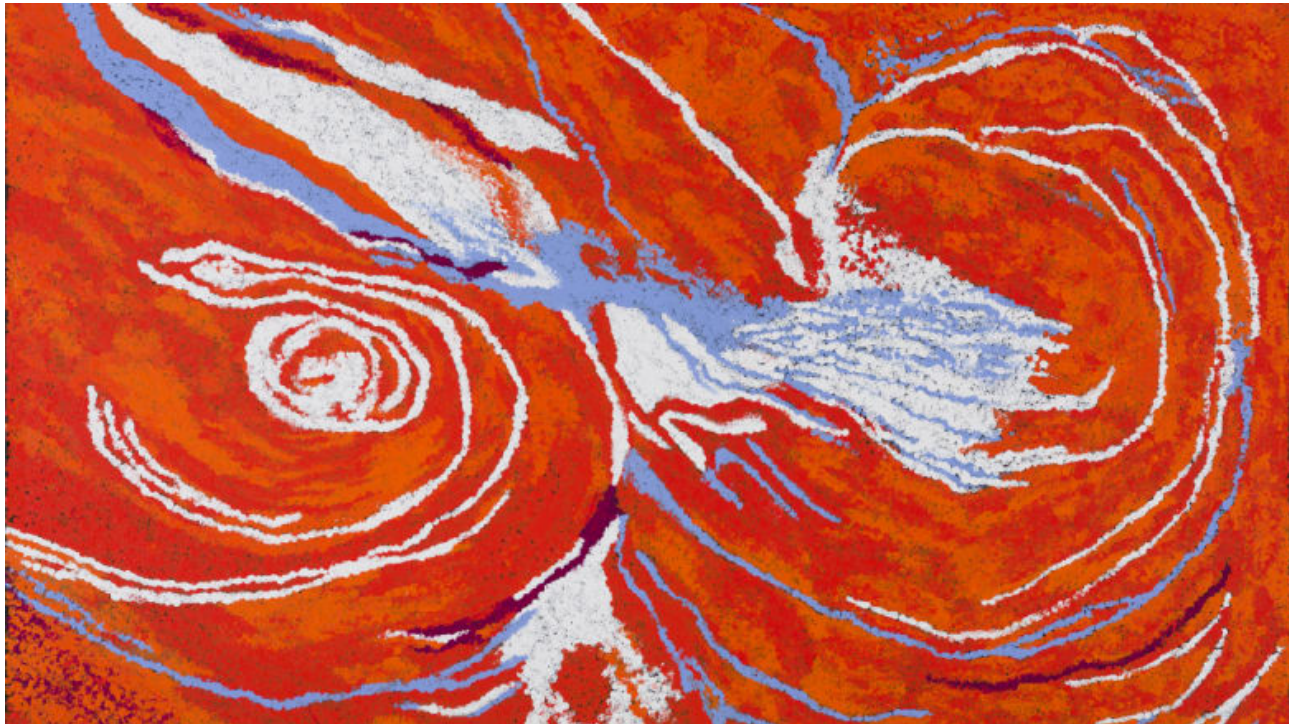
It is interesting how prolific and accomplished many of these artists were. Because of this, despite the fact that many of the key works were collected by the major institutions, like the National Gallery of Australia and the National Gallery of Victoria, sufficient high-calibre paintings remained on the market for major private collections. These included those of Craig Edwards, Arthur Roe and Ken McGregor, amongst many others, and these collections are now increasingly entering the public domain.

The Craig Edwards Gift is a diverse collection, both in terms of the 22 artists represented and the quality of the work. The huge gorgeous untitled canvas by Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri from 2008 is one of the highlights of the exhibition. Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri (born about 1958) was one of the original "Pintupi Nine", the romanticised "lost tribe", who emerged out of the desert in 1984 and integrated into the communal fold of Kiwirrkura.

Despite silly media hype, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri turned to painting on canvas in 1987 and was quickly internationally acclaimed as a leading Western Desert artist. His particular style of painting sacred topography consists of a myriad of concentric lines within a

very subdued palette related to the landscapes of lake Mackay and Marawa, a clay pan to its west, and the travels of the Pintupi ancestors called Tingari.

The work by the prolific veteran Yannima Pikarli Tommy Watson (born 1935) is a strength of the Craig Edwards collection with 27 of his paintings included in the gift. His large untitled canvas of 2014, with swirling masses of vibrant colour, is characteristic of the work of this senior Pitjantjatjara elder.



Yannima Pikarli Tommy Watson, *Untitled*, 2014 in *Western Desert Sublime: The Craig Edwards Gift to the ANU* at ANU Drill Hall Gallery.

Linda Syddick Napaltjarri (born c.1937) was one of a number of Western Desert women who turned to painting in the early 1990s and who in their art fused Christian iconography with traditional Aboriginal styles and motifs.

She was born in the area of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) and after the early death of her father, she was brought up by her stepfather, the artist Lankata Shorty Tjungurrayi. On his death in 1985, Linda Syddick Napaltjarri was given permission to paint his Dreaming and her two uncles, Uta Uta Tjangala and Nosepeg Tjupurrula, taught her to paint.

The Ancestral Kangaroo Men and their journeys across her traditional country around Lake MacKay is the subject of much of her art. In the large four-panel untitled painting from 2013 in the exhibition, there are several episodes gathered together, including in the third panel the first Aboriginal account of an encounter with a windmill, which was initially interpreted as an evil force.



Lynda Siddick Napaltjinpa, *Untitled*, 2013 in *Western Desert Sublime: The Craig Edwards Gift to the ANU*.

This is a dazzling exhibition that also includes the work of Queenie McKenzie, Yinarupa Gibson Nangala, Esther Giles Nampitjinpa, Kayi Kayi Nampitjinpa (Barbara Reid Napangarti), Nyurapayia Nampitjinpa (Mrs Bennett), Tjawina Porter Nampitjinpa, Lorna Ward Napanangka, Dorothy Napangardi, Nyungawarra Ward Napurrula, Ningura Napurrula, Jorna Newberry, Mel Yamba Nungurrayi, Naata Nungurrayi, Nancy Ross Nungurrayi, Tiger Palpatja, Ray James Tjangala, Pinta Pinta Tjapanangka, Wimmitji Tjapangati, and George Tjungurrayi.