



SALON 94

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## Yukultji Napangati

by *Maureen Catbagan* and *Amber Jamilla Musser*

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Installation view, *Yukultji Napangati*, Salon 94, New York, 2019. Courtesy Salon 94, New York.

Yukultji Napangati paints timelines—yellow and orange dots connected by undulations that curve and spiral, submerging the viewer within the immensity of a vibrating sea. Time through lines, and yet outside of time. Hypnotic and visceral, Napangati's abstract landscapes are a meditation on the way surface relates to body and time.

Hailed as a leading figure of the contemporary Papunya Tula Aboriginal painting movement, Napangati is also known as a member of the "Pintupi Nine," who came out of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia in the mid '80s.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps due to cultural dissonance and assimilation issues, her father decided to leave Mission Balgo after a short stay in the 1950s to live nomadically and avoid contact with towns and Westerners. In 1984, roughly four years after his death, when Napangati was around fourteen, her brother, the new patriarch, came into contact with members of their tribe from whom they had separated decades before. The relatives were in the process of setting up an outstation in Winbargo when the first encounter occurred. Their appearance was an international media event—Napangati and her family were celebrated as "the last of the nomads."

A little over a decade later, several members of the family began painting. The men painted together and Napangati initially painted collaboratively with the female members of her family. We can contextualize this gesture to convey their experiences on canvas and wood not only as a form of cultural preservation but also as a means of "earning" a living in contrast to their previous life of living off the land. The motivation could also be part of a broader Australian impetus that began in the 1970s to encourage aboriginal artists to paint their dreamings—histories, teachings, and philosophies from the ancestors that are passed down orally—on more permanent surfaces instead of, as was the custom, ephemerally written on sand or painted on bodies. In an effort to prevent the extraction of Aboriginal knowledge, these paintings (those disparate in tradition) have produced markings that hover between abstraction and representation as a form of coding—a cloaking of ancestral whispers.



Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled*, 2018. Acrylic on linen, 60 1/4 x 48 inches. Courtesy Salon 94, New York.

Napangati's paintings speak of dreamings through matrilineal lines that focus on life in the desert and the Marrapinti rock hole, which was a central feature in her childhood. The fine grain-like dots and golden tones remind us of desert textures. Place becomes palpable for the viewer in the painting's shimmer, which evokes the hot and hazy air between the horizon and sun and the shifting of sand dunes. One could compare

Napangati's resemblance of illustrative lines, illusional optics, and bold color to Modern and Pop masters such as Jackson Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol, thus complicating previous value assumptions between Modern and "Primitive" art. Her markings also mirror Yayoi Kusama's organic accumulations while moving more toward embodiments of Aboriginal histories encoded through the process of painting.

Napangati's terrain weaves us in and out of multiple temporalities. The dots refer both to the infinitesimal and the microbial. The rippling lines connecting them reminds us of fingerprint identity marks. And yet, her paintings convey ancestral accumulations rather than an authorial signature. The field envelops and mesmerizes; blurring past, present, future sense. Time *becomes* duration through surface compilation, a thickness like the rings of trees. This is dreamtime and/or perhaps (an)other time—temporal, nomadic, and non-linear.

Though most of the works in the gallery are framed and hung, one lies unfurled and unstretched atop a low platform. This horizontal field, reminiscent of writing on the sand, is the usual orientation that Napangati paints from. Like Pollock in gestural positioning but more geographic in perspective to the landscape, the view becomes a double-layer. The aerial view is produced from dreaming with the body rather than from the empirical approach of map surveys. It speaks to the repetition of familial time and generational accumulation. We can understand this temporality in relation to her reflections of her youth and its unhurriedness. In an interview with the BBC, she says, "When I was young I would play on the sand dune and when we saw the old people returning to camp we would go back and see what food they had brought with them. After we ate we'd go to sleep. No blanket, we would sleep on the ground . . . Then we would go to another waterhole and make another camp."<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Napangati's sister describes the shock that accompanied her first car ride, which occurred shortly after encountering her relatives: "We were frightened and we covered our faces. As the car kept moving, we looked up and the trees and Spinifex were moving around us and we kept hiding. When the car stopped I jumped off all frightened and dizzy, my head moving. It was the first time I had been in a car. I didn't know what was happening."<sup>3</sup> This difference in technological pace (as the trees seem to be running) in contrast to body-walking-pace fundamentally changes one's relation to time and experience. We can see how the dizzying speed of modernity, personified by the car, disengages the body from more direct connections to place and time, transforming

spatial objects into potentialities. Napangati's paintings speak to the time of dreaming, but also the process and experience of walking and wandering.

Within and through their surfaces, Napangati's paintings evoke an undecipherable intimacy, a body memory of time. This is the striated narrative of muscles, ephemeral and expansive in its repetition of lifetimes and life lines born of the desert.

#### Notes

1. For more background on Napangati's story, see: Alana Mahony, "The Day the Pintupi Nine entered the modern world," *BBC Magazine*, December 23, 2014 <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30500591>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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Maureen Catbagan is a Filipino-American, multi-media artist based in Brooklyn whose work engages social collectivity and examines relations between identity and experience. Collaborative projects include ZAPT zine, Abang-guard, HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? Collective, and experimental music groups Bloodflames and PXALM.

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