‘Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu’ is an invitation to dream

On view at NYU’s Grey Art Museum, the exhibition presents a nuanced celebration of over 50 years of Australia’s oldest Aboriginal-owned arts cooperative.

Mia Shou, Staff Writer

Ethan Li

(Ethan Li for WSN)

For the Aboriginal people of Australia’s Western Desert, dreaming isn’t a trivial matter. Instead, it’s a lifestyle that takes center stage in the Grey Art Museum’s latest exhibition, “Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu: Contemporary Aboriginal Painting from the Australian Desert.”

Opened on Jan. 22 and organized by the University of Virginia’s Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, the gallery covers the Grey’s walls in over 50 years of work from Papunya Tula Artists, Australia’s oldest Aboriginal-owned arts organization.

Known as Tjukurrpa in the Pintupi language, “Dreaming” refers to how ancestral beings created the earth, leaving their mark on the desert in the process. Despite the generations that have honored and preserved the land’s ancestral presence, Australia’s expanding pastoral industry forcibly severed those ties, pushing people from diverse language groups into settlements such as Papunya. In 1971, amid cultural upheaval and displacement, the movement’s first men began painting ancestral designs to ground themselves. The company Papunya Tula Artists was founded just a year later, marking the beginning of a vibrant artistic renaissance.

The works of Papunya Tula’s artists have since been exhibited around the world, including in a 2009 exhibit also hosted at the Grey. Now, the collection makes its return as “Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu,” or “Past and Present Together,” a name that alludes to the timeless, transcendent quality of Tjukurrpa and the art that embodies it.

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The exhibition opens with the avant-garde of the 1970s, when artists painted on any materials they could find. Timmy Payungka Tjapangati's "Storm Dreaming" sits atop a coarse brown composition board that peeks from behind the painting's white background and restless lines. It's notably frameless, shattering the impression that the work is merely decorative wall art while still situating it in the movement's humble beginnings. Without anything to box it in, "Storm Dreaming" maintains its original purpose as Tjapangati's way of communicating and honoring his ancestral connections.

As viewers continue through the gallery, they become increasingly aware of their status as outsiders to Aboriginal culture. At best, the wall text only offers a precursory introduction to the movement's characteristic dotting patterns and abstract, often geometric forms. While it's initially frustrating to view the exhibition with little background knowledge, it becomes clear that this lack of information is intentional.

But this underlying tension doesn't prevent works such as painter Pansy Napangardi's "Men's Dreaming at Ilpili" (1991) from dazzling the untrained eye. In it, Napangardi, one of the first female painters of Papunya Tula, transports her audience to the ancestral site of Ilpili. The landscape's dunes and grasses are depicted as undulating layers of overlapping, multicolored dots that seem to move with the viewer, lulling them into a meditative trance. Though non-Aboriginal people will neither fully understand the story nor the concept of Tjukurrpa, "Men's Dreaming at Ilpili" allows them to get as close as possible while maintaining the intentional boundary between cultures.

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Just around the corner are Doreen Reid Nakamarra's "Untitled (Rockhole site of Marrapinti)" (2006), Napangati's "Ancestral Women at Marrapinti" (2016) and Mantua Nangala's "Untitled" (2025). Though the paintings are all roughly 10 years apart, they all depict Marrapinti, a sacred site for Aboriginal women. While Nakamarra's vision of the site materializes as curving lines of dune-like chevrons, Napangati portrays it as rippling orange rows of vertical lines around an abstract cave, and Nangala's interpretation features muted, horizontal bands of pinks, reds and whites. Despite their differences, the presentation as a group powerfully conveys Papunya Tula's multigenerational connection to painting their land and its transcendent stories of "Dreaming."

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The gallery concludes with the "Papunya Tula Fiftieth Anniversary Suite," 50 unframed canvases meant as a tribute to the concept of past and future together. Lining the wall is a long orderly grid of square paintings, each filled with dense, rhythmic patterns of dots, lines and shapes in warm earth tones. The result is an abstract, geometric collage of recently commissioned works and pieces from deceased artists whose work was continued by their surviving family. Although they are loosely organized by genealogy and the sites they depict, the only reference provided is a laminated brochure with bare-bones information like the artist and medium. In this way, the exhibition leaves the viewers nursing many more questions, not just about the intricacies of Papunya Tula's practice, but about the webs of stories that undoubtedly link these works.

"Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu" is a poignant salute to Aboriginal art's manifold nature that honors, protects and sustains — and an important reminder that in art history, it's okay not to know all the answers.

"Irriṯitja Kuwarri Tjungu: Contemporary Aboriginal Painting from the Australian Desert" will be on display until April 11.

Contact Mia Shou at arts@nyunews.com.