



Jakayu Biljabu, *Pitu & Yarturti*, 2009

the **MAPPING**  
of **MEMORIES**

PHOTOGRAPHY: BO WONG



This month, a collection of art works by Indigenous artists makes the 1200km journey from the Pilbara to Perth. Here, **Victoria Laurie** makes the journey in reverse, swapping her sat nav for local knowledge as she goes bush with the Western Desert's Martu mapmakers.



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That only partly explains *We Don't Need A Map*, a major exhibition of Martu art opening this month at the Fremantle Arts Centre, more than 1200km from the artists' Pilbara home. Connectedness with land comes easily to Martu people who have travelled the desert all their lives - Biljabu and her family lived an innocent nomadic life until, in 1963, they were shocked to encounter a bulldozer driver pushing rocks and trees aside to make roads for the Woomera Rocket Range.

*We Don't Need A Map* is far more than a boast about finding their way around 136,000sq km of Martu country; it's a claim to knowledge of the story, the spirit and the living things that animate each place. The 4WD convoy passes through glistening plains of spinifex grass towards a dark grove of paperbark trees, a sure sign of underground water. French lifts a finger to her lips and gently urges the chatter to cease. The same hush falls in every vehicle, out of respect for the spirits residing at Kinyu, or Well 35, in this case, a powerful, ancestral mother dingo.

The vehicles stop and everyone gets out. The women silently reach for slender branches on the nearest tree and break them off. They form a line behind Biljabu and senior Martu woman Kumpaya Girgiba, who both walk towards the small blackwater soak, symbolically sweeping the country clean with their branches as they go. Within half an hour, after a steak sandwich, the painting begins. Tarpaulins are unrolled to create an outdoor studio floor, pots of paint and blank canvasses are placed before each artist. Brushstrokes are slow and deliberate as Martu

country begins to appear on canvas, manifested in clumps of dotted spinifex, linear sand dunes, fire scars, wells and soaks.

On whitefella maps, their home is a featureless blur of colour where the Great Sandy and Gibson Deserts meet. The scattered communities they live in are depicted as mere pinpricks alongside names such as Jigalong, Nullagine, Parnngurr, Punmu, Kiwirrkurra and Kunawarritji. A bigger dot is Newman, a Pilbara iron ore-mining town,

riding the crest of WA's mineral boom. Martumili Artists has its office and a small gallery there, supported by BHP Billiton and the local shire.

These days, Martu elders fly to Perth for native title negotiations or drive to bush meetings about mining uranium from the yellow-tinged hills that feature in their art. Older men and boys conduct conservation ranger programs or ceremonial business. While it leaves less time to paint, a few senior men such as Yunkurra Billy Atkins have become prominent artists and mentors in the Martu art movement.

Atkins, a highly creative spirit whose work is held by the National Gallery of Australia, personifies the incredible journey of his people from desert isolation to first contact. He was born at Well 9 on the Canning Stock Route in about 1940, and managed to evade the missionaries' zeal to take him in as a child. But his sister, Gracie, was taken, and her extraordinary story of escape and long walk back to Jigalong was portrayed in Phillip Noyce's film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Like many Martu, Atkins' relatives first met whites on the Canning Stock Route (a 1750km trail forged by Alfred Canning in 1906 for drovers to bring cattle from the Kimberley grasslands). Today, it's more likely to be tourists travelling the track - more than 1000 vehicles pass through Kunawarritji, the only fuel stop on the route, each year. ➤

**AT** **KUNAWARRITJI**, a tiny settlement at Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, a convoy readies itself to head bush. Under white-trunked bloodwood trees, staff from the Martumili Artists centre pack boxes of brightly coloured paints and neat rolls of canvas into the back of six vehicles - five Toyotas and a Nissan - while water supplies and huge tarpaulins are hauled onto roof racks.

Fifteen Aboriginal women settle themselves into their seats, as do drivers, caterers and art curators, and the convoy swings out of the settlement. It drives past the Well 33 windmill at the soak near where renowned Indigenous artist Rover Thomas was born. A flock of zebra finches swirls from the water's edge as the vehicles pass, but everyone is too busy laughing as jarring corrugations bounce the occupants around, especially those in the Nissan with its fading shock absorbers.

In each vehicle, the women describe trips they've made through their country, waving animatedly towards a spot on the near or far horizon. As Jakayu Biljabu, a bird-like elderly woman seated between her friend Amy French and young Judith Samson, is reminded of a name or a place she has omitted, the collective story gains strength in its retelling.

“For these women,” observes driver Gabrielle Sullivan, who is Martumili Artists' manager, “going through this country is like us walking the city and knowing every crack in the pavement.”



From top: Rita Simpson (Muni) and Ida Taylor, *Mukurtu*, 2007; Nora Nungabar at work; artists' camp at Well 33

MUKURTU PHOTOGRAPHY: BO WONG





Out at Kinyu, the artists have painted both past and present encounters, having lived the stock route's history. Many Martu art works celebrating the track featured in *Yiwarra Kuju: The Canning Stock Route* a major exhibition at the National Museum of Australia (Canberra) in 2010.

Using a paint-laden brush as a pointer, May Brooks describes how Rover Thomas, her uncle, was taken from the Well 35 area as a child while his relatives were out hunting; a cattle-droving team saw the boy playing alone. "They took him a long way and the family didn't see him for years." It was a pivotal event for both family members and Australian art posterity. Transported north to the east Kimberley, Thomas grew up to become one of the nation's greatest painters in ochre.

Eventually, prolonged drought and starvation saw the nomadic Martu move into white settlements. In 1977, the last of Australia's desert nomads, an elderly couple called Warri and Yatungka, walked out of the desert south of Kunawarriritji.

The fluid strokes and endless stories of the Martu painters unfold over a long, slow afternoon; neither heat nor flies nor aching joints deter them. For many women, these bush painting trips are both cultural affirmation and respite from family duties. There are conversational clues that hint at sadness in other aspects of life; the tragic deaths of close relatives who are

"all finished", indicated by a wave of the hand into the ether, or a "cheeky" grandson who is in jail (hands folded over at the wrist).

Kim Mahood, an award-winning author who grew up on a Tanami Desert cattle station, records the names and stories relevant to each canvas. "We want to give people a vocabulary that will help them understand how much information is coded into Martu paintings," she says. "They're not just beautiful paintings. They have a density of meaning and a raw vitality you don't see in many other Indigenous communities." ➤

THE FLUID STROKES  
AND ENDLESS  
STORIES OF THE  
MARTU PAINTERS  
UNFOLD OVER  
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AFTERNOON



From top: at Martumili, Minyawe Miller paints the country between Kunawarriritji and Punmu; Jakayu Biljabu, *Jila Kujarra (Two Snakes)*, 2008; art at Well 33 artists' camp



JILA KUJARRA PHOTOGRAPHY: BO WONG



From top: Kumpaya Girgiba, *Jurnu Near Kunawarritji*, 2011; artists at Well 33



“EVERY SINGLE SITE CAN BE NAMED BY THESE WOMEN: EACH CIRCLE IS A SOAK-WATER OR ROCKHOLE”

Mahood points to a large canvas of dozens of white-rimmed circles that several of the women are working on. “Every single site can be named by these women. Each circle is a soakwater or a rockhole, some are living water, some are available at certain times of the year.”

French explains she is painting three water sources in her traditional country – a blue-dot waterhole she calls *Tiwa*, a big seeping soak in dark green paint and a rocky well “with a windlass to take the water out”.

A riot of emu tracks with which younger artist Judith Samson has covered her canvas, as seen on a hunting trip with her grandparents, elicit chuckles of recognition from her grandmother, Dadda.

The paintings in *We Don't Need A Map* have been created over many months at camps such as this. Their diversity is surprising; circle, dot and line traditional paintings sit alongside fearlessly original, quasi-realistic panoramas of trees, hills, birds and river bends. An entire wall in Fremantle Arts Centre features such a canvas, *Karlamilyi*, French and sister Lily Long's 5m x 3m homage to their birthplace in the Rudall River National Park. In another room lurk lurid images of fanged and clawed monsters, cannibal beings that Yunkurra Billy Atkins says live beneath the salt-encrusted surface of Kumpupirntily (Lake Disappointment).

There's a mischievous, playful side to Martu art and its creators, as reflected in the video animations of Atkins' monsters by non-Indigenous artist Sohan Ariel Hayes. Martu

filmmaker Curtis Taylor and collaborator Lily Hibberd capture the raw energy and occasional poignancy of community living using a graffiti-covered phonebooth and video recordings of polyglot conversations whispered or shouted into the handset.

If *We Don't Need A Map* aims to bring the reality of Martu life to a wider Australian public, it also celebrates a quiet success story in the Aboriginal art movement. Martumili Artists has achieved impressive milestones without the usual media fanfare associated with Central Australian art. The first Martu art exhibition was in September 2007 at Melbourne's William Mora Galleries; 18 shows have followed.

Last year, a group of Martumili artists was invited to Stanford University in California to accompany *Waru! Holding Fire In Australia's Western Desert*, an exhibition about Martu fire regimes. And when the Queen visited the National Gallery of Victoria last year, several Martu women danced and sang, before elderly artist Mulyatingki Marney, shaking with nerves, stepped forward to present one of her paintings to Her Majesty.

At journey's end, those who can't reach home by car wait for their aircraft at Kunawarritji's dirt airstrip. Heading back to Newman or Punmu or Jigalong, at 4500ft, they fly over shimmering umber sand dunes, elegant circles around salt-ringed soaks and scarlet earth. It evokes Kumpaya Girgiba's white circle around Well 35, Amy French's shrub-dotted hills and Yunkurra Billy Atkins' malevolent white salt lake. The world below is transformed into one vast Martu painting. 🌐

*We Don't Need A Map: A Martu Experience Of The Western Desert*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Nov 13-Jan 20. [www.fac.org.au](http://www.fac.org.au)