

# COLOR

*A Natural History of the Palette*

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# 1

## Ochre

*"Art . . . must do something more than give pleasure: it should relate to our own life so as to increase our energy of spirit."*

SIR KENNETH CLARK, *Looking at Pictures*

In the lakelands of Italy there is a valley with ten thousand ancient rock carvings. These petroglyphs of Valle Camonica are signs that Neolithic people lived there once, telling stories and illustrating them with pictures. Some show strangely antlered beasts, too thin to provide much meat for a feast, and others show stick-people hunting them with stick-weapons. Another rock has a large five-thousand-year-old butterfly carved into it—although my visit coincided with that of a horde of German schoolchildren queuing up to trace it, and sadly I couldn't see the original through all the paper and wax crayons.

But in a quieter place, far away from the groups, I found a flat dark rock covered with fifty or more designs for two-story houses with pointy roofs. It didn't feel particularly sacred to me as I stood looking at it. It was more like an ancient real estate office or an architect's studio, or just a place where people sat and idly carved their domestic dreams. The crude carvings are not colored now, of course: any paints would have disappeared long ago in the Alpine rain. But as I sat there, contemplating the past, I saw what looked like a small stone on the ground. It was a different color from all the other mountain rubble—whatever it was, it didn't belong.

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I picked it up and realized something wonderful. It didn't look promising: a dirty pale brown stub of claylike earth about the size and shape of a chicken's heart. On the front it was flat and on the back there were three planes like a slightly rounded three-sided pyramid. But when I placed the thumb and the first two fingers of my right hand over those three small planes, it felt immensely comfortable to hold. And what I realized then was that this piece of clay was in fact ochre, and had come from a very ancient paintbox indeed. I wet the top of it with saliva, and once the mud had come off it was a dark yellow color, the color of a haystack. When, copying the carvings, I drew a picture of a two-story house on the rock, the ochre painted smoothly with no grit: a perfect little piece of paint. It was extraordinary to think that the last person who drew with it—the person whose fingers had formed the grooves—lived and died some five thousand years ago. He or she had probably thrown this piece away after it had become too small for painting. A storm must have uncovered it, and left it for me to find.

Ochre—iron oxide—was the first color paint. It has been used on every inhabited continent since painting began, and it has been around ever since, on the palettes of almost every artist in history. In classical times the best of it came from the Black Sea city of Sinope, in the area that is now Turkey, and was so valuable that the paint was stamped with a special seal and was known as “sealed Sinope”: later the words “sinopia” or “sinoper” became general terms for red ochre.<sup>2</sup> The first white settlers in North America called the indigenous people “Red Indians” because of the way they painted themselves with ochre (as a shield against evil, symbolizing the good elements of the world,<sup>3</sup> or as a protection against the cold in winter and insects in summer<sup>4</sup>), while in Swaziland’s Bomvu Ridge (Bomvu means “red” in Zulu), archaeologists have discovered mines that were used at least forty thousand years ago to excavate red and yellow pigments for body painting.<sup>5</sup> The word “ochre” comes from the Greek meaning “pale yellow,” but somewhere along the way the word shifted to suggest something more

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robust—something redder or browner or earthier. Now it can be used loosely to refer to almost any natural earthy pigment, although it most accurately describes earth that contains a measure of hematite, or iron ore.

There are big ochre mines in the Luberon in southern France and even more famous deposits in Siena in Tuscany: I like to think of my little stub of paint being brought from that area by Neolithic merchants, busily trading paint-stones for furs from the mountains. Cennino Cennini wrote of finding ochre in Tuscany when he was a boy walking with his father. "And upon reaching a little valley, a very wild steep place, scraping the steep with a spade, I beheld seams of many kinds of color," he wrote. He found yellow, red, blue and white earth, "and these colors showed up in this earth just the way a wrinkle shows in the face of a man or a woman."

I knew there would be stories to be uncovered in many ochre places—from Siena to Newfoundland to Japan. But for my travels in search of this first colored paint I wanted to go to Australia—because there I would find the longest continuous painting tradition in the world. If I had been charmed by my five-thousand-year-old ochre, how much more charmed would I be in Australia where cave painters used this paint more than forty thousand years ago? But I also knew that in the very center of Australia I would find the story of how that ancient painting tradition was transformed to become one of the most exciting new art movements in recent years.

Before I left for Australia I called an anthropologist friend in Sydney, who has worked with Aboriginal communities for many years. At the end of our phone conversation I looked at the notes I had scribbled. Here they are:

- It'll take time. Lots.
- Ochre is still traded, even now.
- Red is Men's Business. Be careful.

I had absentmindedly underlined the last point several times. It seemed that the most common paint on earth was also sometimes

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the most secret. Finding out about ochre was going to be a little more complicated than I had thought.

## SYDNEY

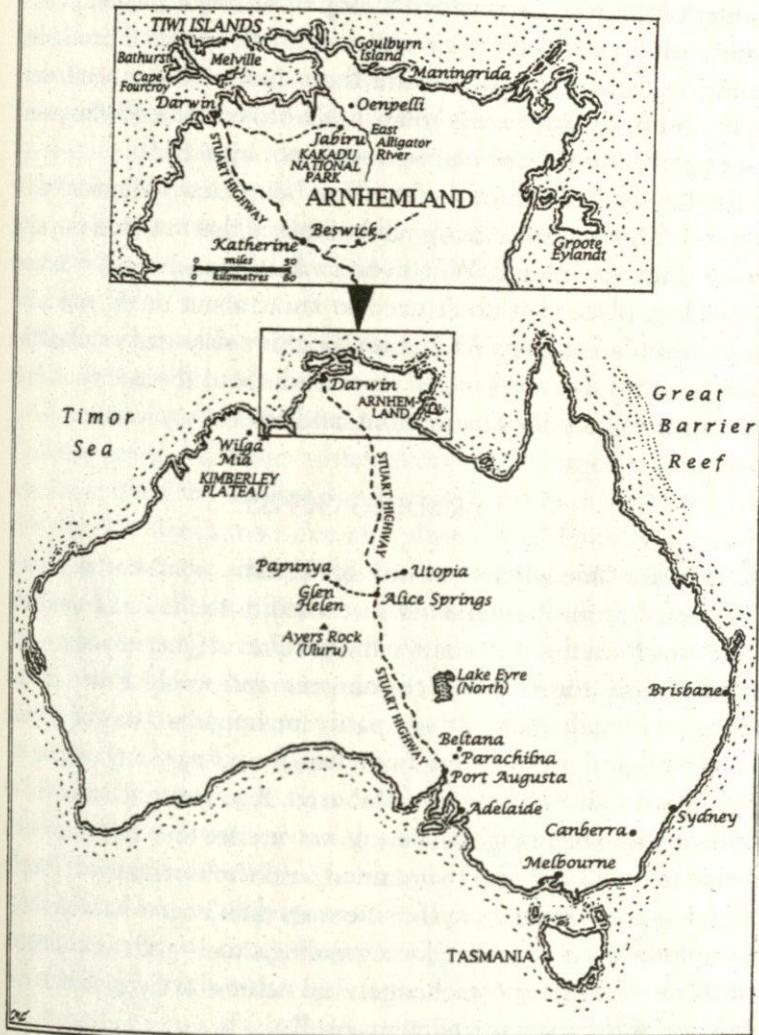
Hetty Perkins, one of the Aboriginal curators at the Gallery of New South Wales, described the secrecy of indigenous traditions most vividly, as we drank coffee in the gallery garden after the opening of a major retrospective of Aboriginal art that she had organized.<sup>6</sup> “This is a blanket,” she said, putting her hand on a piece of white paper in my notebook, “and this is Australia,” she continued, touching the wooden table. “You lift the paper, and it’s all underneath . . . Many paintings are like the blanket . . . we don’t understand the full extent of the meanings, but we know that they mean country.” I was intrigued to know whether she had peeked underneath—at the table, so to speak. “It’s not my privilege,” she said. “That’s why I’m careful. It’s not my place to ask anyone what anything means. That will come later on.”

So, effectively—I summarized for myself that evening—I was going to look for a pigment that in one of its incarnations I wasn’t allowed to see, and which was used to paint secrets I wasn’t allowed to know. And I respected that secrecy. But what then, under those rather rigorous conditions, would I find in the north and then the center of Australia to help me understand the appeal of ochre?

## DARWIN

What I discovered was ochre itself. I found it immediately and I found miles of it. I had not quite appreciated how the Top End of Australia is a quarry of ochres—there is so much of it that people use it commercially for colored concrete. On my first morning in Darwin I went for an early morning walk along East Point beach, which is famous locally for its colors. The rocks were like raspberry ripple ice cream, as if some lazy Ancestral Being had been given

# TRAVELS THROUGH AN AUSTRALIAN PAINTBOX



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the job of mixing up the yellow, white, orange and red ingredients into the brown color of proper cliffs but had been distracted by a passing possum and ended up leaving them to dry in unmixed swirls of color. The crimson hematite was splashed like spilt blood over the whiter rocks. When I ground the loose pebbles on the mortar of the rock, and added a drop of seawater, I found I could paint with them—on my skin and on the pale parts of the rock. But unlike my smooth Italian ochre these Australian pigments were gritty and flaked unevenly. You wouldn't travel miles for this paint, I thought. Although, of course, I realized, I just had.

To the east I could see Arnhemland being slowly illuminated by the sun. This was the Aboriginal homeland that outsiders can visit only if they are invited. When you look at some maps, it is almost a blank: a place you don't need to know about unless you have your own map already. As I sat on the stone slabs and watched the sun painting the sky pink, I wondered about the colors of Arnhemland. Where they came from, and where they went to.

## TRADING OCHRE

There was a time when the whole of Australia was a network of trading posts.<sup>7</sup> From Arnhemland in the north to the tip of southern Australia, from the west coast to the beaches of Queensland, groups would come together for corroborees and would barter prized items with each other. It was partly an important way of getting good tools and useful items; but it was also a way of articulating social networks in (mostly) peaceful ways. If you were accustomed to trading with your neighbors every wet season, then that was when peace treaties could be maintained, and rivalries resolved. People might swap a boomerang (boomerangs didn't come back in those days) for a spear or an axe for a grinding stone—with a corroboree ritual to celebrate the exchange. And ochre—really good ochre—was one of the most prized items of all.

Wilga Mia in the Campbell Ranges of Western Australia is one

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of the most sacred ochre mines in the continent. In 1985, Nicolas Peterson and Ronald Lampert<sup>8</sup> described going there with some of the traditional owners from the Warlpiri tribe. They had to ask permission for entry—not only from the owners but also from the sacred beings who, it was believed, lived beneath its ancient chambers. “Don’t be unpleasant to us,” the men once prayed before they went in with their torches and metal axes, while on another occasion they cajoled the spirit of the mine, saying how they wanted only a small amount. Before the 1940s the ochre had been traded for spears with tribes to the south and for shields and boomerangs with those from the north.<sup>9</sup> And—at least in the 1980s—it was still being mined and traded, although where once it had been collected in bark dishes, by the end of the twentieth century it was placed in plastic buckets.

Another famous deposit is in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia. For possibly thousands of years Aboriginal expeditions headed south into the area from Lake Eyre. In *Goods from Another Country*, Isabel McBryde writes about Diyari men taking two months to travel the thousand-mile round trip to collect their red gold from the Bookartoo mine at a place called Parachilna. They used to return home with 20 kilos of ochre each, already formed into baked round cakes. These would be carried on their backs in bags made of possum or kangaroo skin, and on their heads they would have huge seed-grinding stones from a nearby stone quarry. There would be seventy or eighty men travelling together: it must have been an impressive sight.

Then in 1860 the white farmers arrived, along with their sheep and their land registrations—and a series of skirmishes began. To the administrators in Adelaide these were known as the ochre wars, although the origins of the conflict had more to do with what happened on the way to and from the sacred mine than about what was found in it. The Aboriginals were not remotely interested in European notions of land ownership but they *were* interested in this new, bleating bush tucker. And when they made their yearly

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expeditions to Bookartoo they took what meat they needed for their journey. The white communities were quick in their reprisals (on the “hanging for a sheep or a lamb” theory), and these were followed by counterreprisals from the Aboriginals. A nineteenth-century settler called Robert Bruce, quoted by Philip Jones of the South Australian Museum in a paper written in 1983,<sup>10</sup> wrote that “a solitary shepherd would have been about as safe [in the Flinders] as an unpopular land agent in Tiperary [sic] during the good ould toimes.”

In November 1863 the ochre wars became an ochre massacre. Jones noted that, more than a century later, the Aboriginal people in the local area still knew the precise place where scores of Aboriginals were killed by the angry settlers. It is near Beltana, about 540 kilometers north of Adelaide. Throughout the 1860s there was terrible violence from both sides and eventually someone in the South Australian administration suggested a solution. If they couldn’t stop the men going to the mountain, perhaps they could bring the mountain to the men. How about moving the mine? he said, arguing that the black fellas wouldn’t know the difference. And unbelievably, in 1874, this is effectively what the settlers did. But they moved the wrong mine.

The decision-makers in Adelaide couldn’t persuade any transport company to take the red rocks all the way from Parachilna (it was an almost impossible route for bullock carts then), so instead they removed four tons of ochre from a traditional mine owned by the Kaura people by the coast, and organized for it to be carted up to Lake Eyre—it took weeks, but the roads were at least negotiable. Once they reached their destination, they persuaded the German missionaries to distribute it, in the hope that the resulting glut in supply would mean the ochre collectors would find other things to do.

It was a wasted effort. All the Kaura red ochre in the world couldn’t dissuade the men of Lake Eyre from making their annual expedition—for three reasons. First it was a kind of pilgrimage. You can probably buy Lourdes water in London, but part of its appeal is the transformation that occurs when you make the journey

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yourself. The Aborigines had built elaborate ceremonies around collecting the red ochre and bringing it back. Trotting over to the mission to collect a little bag of free rocks rather missed the point. Stories can only be told by being told, and journeys can only be made by being travelled.

Second, ochre was essential for bartering. Trading happens when one item is seen to be almost equal in value to another. What value did free paint have? It wouldn't have bought very many precious pearl shells from the Kimberley coast, nor would it have bought much of the *pituri* tobacco the Diyari people were so keen to buy from other tribes. The recipe for making *pituri* leaves into a super-narcotic was a secret, kept only by the elders of certain tribes, so swapping ochre for *pituri* was swapping a secret for a secret and therefore appropriate. If the Lake Eyre tribes were denied sacred ochre then it would mean they were not able to play their part in the complex trading network that Aboriginal tribes depended on.

Third, the ochre was used for painting ritual designs, and the Kaura red simply wasn't either good enough or sacred enough: it did not contain the hint of mercury that made the Bookartoo paint so special. In 1882, a journalist called T. A. Masey wrote that: "the natives would not use [the Kaura ochre]. It did not give them that much-coveted shiny appearance that filled them with delight and admiration when contemplating their noble selves, and that also made them the envy of rival tribes."<sup>11</sup> For Masey this was probably an expression of a primitive urge for glittery things, but there are other explanations. The sense that light is a manifestation of the glory of the sacred—that the numinous is held within the luminous—is common to almost every faith. Perhaps by painting themselves with a color that gleamed, the Aboriginals were not only symbolizing the sacred; they were embodying it.

"Oh yeah, *pituri*," said Roqué Lee. "Tastes like shit but works like ten cups of coffee at once." I met Roqué (who pronounces his name "Rocky") at the Aboriginal Art Gallery in Darwin: he used to

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be a ranger at Kakadu National Park, but for the past five years he'd mostly been demonstrating didgeridoos. His father is Chinese-Australian and his mother is Aboriginal. "I've got three cultures," he said happily. "You can see it in my cooking. I do *cha-siu* snake, long-neck turtle stuffed with ginger and stir-fry magpie goose." He lives in Darwin during the week but likes going hunting on weekends. "It's magpie goose season soon," he said. "We build a blind on the edge of a swamp, and then make a bundle of spears. When the geese come over we just throw the spears in the air. No need to aim." He often mixes white kaolin clay with seagull eggs, and uses it to paint stripes on his face while he's hunting. "Just to let Mother Nature know we're there." They don't do that for magpie geese, though: "They're so fat, we don't need luck." But they always paint the ends of the spears with white paint. For luck? "No." He grinned. "So we can find them more easily later."

He showed me around the gallery. Like many Darwin art shops, it has divided its paintings into two sections—the huge abstract paintings from the Central Desert, mostly in acrylic paints, with plastic as a binder rather than oil,<sup>12</sup> and the paintings from the Northern Territory. The former I knew I would find farther south together with—I hoped—the stories of their bright colors. The latter are still mostly in natural ochres as they were when the explorer and ethnologist Sir Baldwin Spencer began to collect them from Arnhemland tribes in around 1912, although today the black, white, red and yellow earths are now more often bound with synthetic glues. The new binders are easier to obtain, and they last longer than orchid juice or seagull egg.

The northern Aboriginal paintings were originally painted on the cut bark of the stringybark tree (which is more like paper than string) although they are now mainly on canvas—partly for ecological reasons and partly because that is what the buyers want, and because many paintings today tend to be created with the buyers in mind, rather than because they needed to be painted for their own sake. They are covered with patterns made up of diagonal stripes

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and cross-hatching. The latter technique was apparently brought in by Macassan traders (from the island of Sulawesi which is now part of Indonesia) several hundred years before white settlers arrived on the continent. It is a reminder that Aboriginal culture has never been isolated, but instead has been influenced by (and perhaps has influenced) outside forces from Indonesia, Polynesia, China and elsewhere. It also, curiously, works as an optical illusion, the finely drawn parallel lines creating a shimmer in a similar way to paintings by British twentieth-century artist Bridget Reilly. Howard Morphy, in his book *Aboriginal Art*, suggested this “quiver”—which looks as if it had been painted with a shaking hand—was deliberate, and a way of making the painting shimmer and appear to move.<sup>13</sup>

The northern paintings tend to be highly figurative—showing, for example, the lightning-man Namarrkon, with his halo of electricity and axes stuck in his limbs (as humans stick them into logs), ready to be flung at humans who disobey the law; or the Luma Luma, who couldn’t keep his hands off women, and was killed by the angry men (but not until he had told them his best stories). Others show the animal totems—fish or wallabies or turtles or crocodiles—placed around depictions of the humans and ancestors whose stories they share. When I first saw one of the turtle pictures I thought the diagonal lines around it were simply decoration. But then I spent one long night watching giant turtle eggs being laid on a desert island not far from Darwin—for a research project run by the University of the Northern Territory. And when I watched the mother green-back returning slowly into the ocean after laying eggs on the beach she had been born on forty years earlier, I realized the painting was an uncannily accurate picture of the tracks she made with her flippers.

Traditional Aboriginal life only makes sense in the context of the time when the Ancestors first arose out of the original mud or sea or sky and brought the first sunrise with them. In English it is articulated as the “Dreaming” or “Dreamtime”—a dream in the sense that it is not set in the past, but in a kind of parallel present

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universe, rather like the one we operate in while we are asleep. In Aboriginal lore, the Dreaming is the reason for everything that has ever existed and ever will exist. And its stories are told in layers, depending on how ready, or authorized, the listener is to understand them. It is said that your personal Dreaming depends on where your mother was when she first felt you in the womb. The Ancestors who live in that place have given you "anima"—they have animated you—and when you grow up their stories and songs will be in your trust, and you in theirs.

There is very little that is gentle about the Dreaming; in fact a lot of it is very raunchy. Its stories often involve ancestral animals and people being killed or punished, or they include details of them moving through the land along paths that have become sacred tracks, finding food and allies and enemies. They are epic stories containing (as all the best epics do) universal truths. They are about the law of the land, but they are also the land itself, and only certain people are authorized to know them. So a story or song about, say, the Wawilak sisters—who set out on a journey at the beginning of time, and were swallowed by the Rainbow Serpent when one of them bled into his waterhole—works on several levels. It acts as a reminder of spiritual truths, as a warning to behave according to certain social rules, and as a map. It might—if you have been authorized to decode it—tell you to turn toward the east at this hill to find water, or to stop at that camp to find grubs, and it acts almost as a key to the country, a way of finding your way through it safely even if you have never been there before. And similarly the material—ochre—with which these stories are passed on in rituals or on caves is not only from the land. *It is the land.*

Red ochre has dreaming stories—there are probably as many stories as there are tribes, but most of them seem to hinge on the spilling of blood. Parachilna was said in some stories to be the blood of an ancestral emu, and by others to be the blood of the Marindi dog, which was tricked and killed by a lizard hanging at its throat.

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Wilga Mia was, according to Warlpiri legend, made by a man who stole it from a deposit of congealed blood. And another story of red ochre from the Kalgoorlie area<sup>14</sup> tells the tale of Kirkin, a man with sun-bleached hair, whose beauty dazzled everyone—especially himself.

At sunrise every morning this matinee idol of the Ancestral Age would stand on a high boulder, comb his golden hair and enjoy all the adulation and attention. But one person did not adore him. A healer called Wyju saw straight through Kirkin and laughed at him for his vanity. Naturally Kirkin hated him for this, and plotted revenge. He told Wyju he wanted to go out hunting with him to find a special bird that was wonderful to eat. The only problem was that a hunter could only catch it by jumping on top of it. The comedy of the chase was cut short by Wyju's jumping into a trap of spiked spears that Kirkin had set for him. The wicked Kirkin laughed and left Wyju to writhe around the valley, spikes piercing the tender soles of his feet, staining the earth with his blood. And ever since that time, the myth goes, Aboriginals have gone to that valley for red ochre. They have smeared the "blood" of the young ancestral healer on their sons before initiation, to teach them to be good men.

This is one of the reasons why ochre is not only sacred but also dangerous. Red ochre is an integral part of the initiation ceremony of young boys when they become men. In north-east Arnhemland, for example, novices are smeared with ochre in sacred clan patterns on their chests, with white clay masks on their faces. The paint is part of the secret of initiation—and perhaps it is even the secret itself. Many people have speculated on the significance of this red earth—and anthropologists have tended to focus on the symbolism of red as representing men's blood (meaning death), or women's menstrual blood (signifying, perhaps, the potential for giving birth). But there is an alternative theory, a curious one: that the iron in red ochre somehow acted as a kind of magnet, to show Ancestors and Aboriginal people the way along sacred paths.<sup>15</sup>

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When I first heard this I dismissed it as New Age confusion, but then later I heard something new about red ochre—something that did not change my mind, but left it a little more open.

I learned that scientists in Italy have found a new technique for dating frescos almost to the year they were painted, simply by examining the red paint. "Red ochre contains iron, and the iron molecules act like compass needles," explained Professor Giacomo Chiari of the Department of Mineralogical and Petrological Sciences at the University of Turin. He said that in the few minutes between daubing red ochre onto wet clay, and the time it dries, the molecules realign themselves toward the direction of magnetic north. "And if you don't move the walls then that is how they stay," Professor Chiari said. Magnetic north changes every year—it can fluctuate over a range of 18 degrees, so you can learn when the fresco was painted from the direction in which the red ochre is pointing. This can lead to curious artistic discoveries: at the Vatican Library, for example, there were three frescos which were believed to have been painted in 1585, 1621 and 1660. The Turin scientists took tiny samples from the borders to see whether they could test their theory. "We couldn't understand the results. All the ochre was pointing the same way and it wasn't in any of the ways we were expecting," Professor Chiari said. And then they did more tests and realized the truth: the frescos were original, but all the borders had been repainted in 1870. Magnetic north is very erratic, though, Professor Chiari added. "So we can do it both ways: we sometimes use frescos—if we know when they were painted—to tell us where magnetic north was that year."

He was not aware of the technique being used to date bodies that had been painted in red ochre—as has been a funerary custom in Australia, Africa, America and Europe for thousands of years. Partly because nobody could be sure whether the body had been moved after the ochre had dried and partly because the burials had happened too far in the past. "You can't go too far back because we don't know so much about magnetic north thousands of years ago."

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Roqué said there was no way I would learn about red ochre in ceremonies: "it's forbidden for anyone to talk about it," and he told me how it was far harder to learn about Aboriginal traditions in the 2000s than it was in the 1930s—not simply because there are few men and women who remember them, but also because there is a deliberate move toward hiding information in order to protect it. His sister was working on a project to put anthropological works about Aboriginal ceremonies into special places in libraries, where readers had to apply for permission to read them. But there were still plenty of other uses of ochre that I *could* see, he said. If I wanted to know about ochre in culture I should go to the Tiwi Islands. And if I wanted to know about ochre in art I had to go to Kakadu, on the edge of Arnhemland. "It's the biggest art gallery in the world."

## OCHRE INCEST TABOOS

The Tiwi Islands are just twenty minutes' flight across the Apsley Strait from Darwin, but when you first arrive at Bathurst air strip it seems as if you are in another country. Not Australia at all. The language is Tiwi, and the children at least scarcely speak any English. The people are represented by sixteen councillors who meet at the Tiwi White House to oversee the running of the islands. Although they like to keep themselves separate from the rest of Australia, some years ago the Council voted to allow a maximum of a dozen tourists a day, so that outsiders could understand their culture.

On the surface the Tiwi people have an idyllic island existence. Plenty of sunshine, bright shirts, pretty painted buildings surrounded by palms, lots of artists working in big bright art centers and everything fringed by immaculate beaches. But on other levels the islanders not only have to contend with some of the alcohol problems that threaten so many Aboriginal communities, they also have some of the most rigorously prescribed ways of social organization I have ever encountered.

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The problem stems from the demographics. There are only 1,400 people on the two islands of Melville and Bathurst, and for many years they believed they were the only people in the world. So they developed strict ways of preventing intermarriage. And those ways have remained. There are no mixed schools on the island. Not for education theory reasons, but because sisters and brothers cannot even look at each other, let alone speak. Our guide, Richard Tungatulum—one of the councillors of Tiwi—related an anecdote of a man who arrived at the tiny field hospital one day in tremendous pain. The doctor was out, but instead of helping the patient the nurse went to make herself a cup of tea. “She had to,” said Richard. “She was his sister.”

Everyone is born as one of four moieties. You can be a sun, a stone, a mullet fish or a pandanus palm. If you are a sun then you can marry neither sun nor stone: your husband or wife must be either a mullet or a pandanus.<sup>16</sup> The Tiwi world is made up of four symbolic ochre colors—and each moiety is represented by one of them: sun is red, stone is black, pandanus is white and mullet is yellow. Red and black marry only white and yellow: the “strong” colors always marry the “gentle” ones.

Despite some of the best attempts by some of the worst missionaries,<sup>17</sup> Tiwi beliefs have survived alongside the biblical ones. The Tiwi Dreamtime story involves a blind woman bursting through the earth with her three babies in her arms and crawling over the dark and featureless land,<sup>18</sup> shaping its topography. Her daughter grows up to become the sun and marry the moon. And in the mornings the sun paints her body with red ochre to please her husband, and then when she reaches the western horizon at the end of the day she powders herself with yellow so she is beautiful for her night journey through the underworld.

In the past, there was no trade with the mainland so all the ochres came from the islands. The best white paints tend to be from One Tree Point and the yellows are from Cape Fourcray, and collecting them—in the days before four-wheel-drives—used to re-

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quire a full-scale expedition. There are some natural reds, but they are rare, and most of the ordinary red paints are made by cooking the yellows. This is one extraordinary characteristic of this iron-oxide paint: heating the yellow ochre makes it turn red through a process called calcining. It is not a good enough red for the most sacred uses (it is not shiny enough), but it is valued for ordinary painting. And in Europe too, calcining is so common that some paints have two names because of it. Sienna is matched by the redder "burnt sienna," while in the eighteenth century Dutch paint-makers used to buy yellow ochre in France, heat it, and sell it as English Red.<sup>19</sup>

I was introduced to four women who explained some of the more exotic aspects of Tiwi culture. There are twenty-two different dances, and each person inherits one. There is, for example, a crocodile dance and a mosquito dance; there is even one for a battleship. I asked a woman called Doreen Tipiloura what her dance was. "My great-great-uncle saw a train once, on the mainland," she said. "So I dance train."

Each person also has their own face painting, according to what their Dreaming is, and they demonstrated the patterns for us by painting their own faces. Would it be possible to paint my face with ochre? I wondered. So Ruth Kerinaua gamely painted her Little Sheep Big Sheep totem on my cheeks and forehead—candy stripes above the eyes and beneath the chin, then smaller stripy lines along my cheekbones. It was only later—when I saw a photograph—that I realized she had altered the colors into a kind of tonal mirror image of her own painting. Where she painted white on her own face, she painted black on mine: where she had yellow looking luminous on her black skin, I had red looking luminous on mine. It was as if some of the lines and tonal contrasts were particularly important in the design, so she needed to paint them in a way that highlighted them. Caucasian people, incidentally, are not called "white" but "red" in Tiwi language. I was a *moretani*: a "hot red face," although they didn't call me that to my hot red face.

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Ochre was also used on what are called "pokemani" poles. A death on Tiwi is mourned for a long time. For the first month after a close family member dies you literally cannot lift a hand and other people have to feed you like a baby. The name of the deceased cannot be mentioned for an agreed amount of time—sometimes years—which only ends when a ceremony is held in which the dead person's belongings are buried, and the family erects a series of slim painted poles to mark the place. Usually visitors cannot see these poles, but we were led to a quiet place in the forest, where the possessions of one of Richard's friends lay buried. He had died of a heart attack while playing football, when he was just thirty years old. He had been the first Tiwi tour guide and his family decided he would have liked his grave to be a place where strangers could learn more about the culture he was so proud of.

The poles are like an obituary, if you know how to read them. Richard's friend was a sun moiety so there was a predominance of red in the designs. And the patterns each showed something about the dead person's life. "The dots are people and the lines are pathways," Richard explained. "And what are these strange shapes?" someone asked, pointing to big yellow ovals on one of the poles. "Those? Oh, those are Aussie Rules footballs."

## THE EDGES OF ARNHEMLAND

Roqué had told me that if I wanted to see ochre in ancient art, I had to go to Arnhemland. And two days later I found myself at its fringes. Kakadu is the section of western Arnhemland that has been opened up to visitors, as part of a national park. The rest—everything to the east of the East Alligator River—is open only to residents and permit holders. Yet I was lucky. On my first night there was a one-off theatre performance—a collaboration between the people who lived in the settlement of Oenpelli and the Stilt Company from Perth. *Crying Baby* was a highlight of the Festival of Darwin, and was performed under the stars. It was the only

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theater show that I have been to that has been dependent on river tides, with the extra frisson that if you were caught in the middle you might get eaten alive—not by alligators, though: the river was wrongly named and the huge reptiles that skulk around this fast-running river are actually crocodiles, but no less fierce for that. “Man got eaten last year,” a ranger said cheerfully, when we were waiting to cross into what one of the white theatergoers gleefully called “the forbidden land.”

The play was based on the personal history of a storyteller called Thompson Yulidjirri, whose family members were removed from their homes by missionaries and taken to Goulburn Island, mixed up with the Dreaming story of a Crying Child, whose parents did not look after it, their lack of care resulting in the Rainbow Serpent taking its revenge. The story was chosen to highlight some of the problems of so many settlements throughout Australia, where alcoholism is rife, and children can too often be abandoned. In the audience Old Bill Neidje—one of the respected elders of Oenpelli—was sitting in a wheelchair. When Neidje was a child the missionaries gave him and his family white flour. They didn’t know what it was and they used it as body paint. “You’re wasting food,” the missionaries told them, laughing, before introducing them to the mysteries of damper—a flour-and-water glue that is cooked over a fire into an unleavened bread. But the Aboriginals would have been wise to have stuck to the body paint theory. Their new diet of wheat and sugar was the first step on a journey toward diabetes and dialysis.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the play I went to talk to Thompson and his fellow elders. They were daubed in white ochre, and said they would be happy to talk about their use of the pigment. We could talk now, they said, or I could go to Oenpelli to see them. But now was impossible—the Alligator tides were turning and we would soon be unable to return to Kakadu—and the next day I learned that, invitation or not, it would probably take at least ten days to get a permit. I thought I could just make it, I said, filling in the form.

## COLOR

"That's ten *working* days," said the white administrator, reluctantly taking the application from me anyway.

I spent some of the intervening time looking at part of one of the biggest collections of art in the world. There are many thousands of paintings in caves and rock shelters all over the plateau. Some of them tell sacred stories—of rainbow snakes and lightning gods, of hunting grounds, and of ancient sisters who walked across the land making waterholes and hillocks and places so dangerous that only initiated men can go there. Then there are Mimi paintings, said to have been made by the shy stick-like spirits who live in the cracks between the rocks. You can see the work of the Mimi in the highest paintings at the tops of caves, which can only have been executed by very tall creatures, or perhaps by humans with scaffolding. There are also spray paintings, probably done by someone putting wet paint in his or her mouth and spraying it over their hand (or a child's hand) or foot. And then there are the so-called "rubbish" paintings—with a whole host of subjects, some of which are rude, some historical—including three-hundred-year-old paintings of Macassan traders arriving in their boats—and some the kind of distilled Dreaming stories designed to be told to children.

Although the most sacred paintings were believed not only to depict the Ancestors but to embody them, many of the other cave paintings were never meant to last. They were illustrated lessons and they had a similar significance to, say, blackboards in a religious college. What they signified was precious, but what they were was not. However, today, when much of Aboriginal tradition has disappeared, all the paintings have become valuable in their own right, both as artifacts and as ancient messages for future generations.

According to George Chaloupka, in his book about the paintings of Arnhemland entitled *Journey in Time*, there are eight main color terms for the paints: black, yellow, deep yellow, the red that is made by burning yellow, a light pink and the shiny hematite red with a purple tint. A color from the twentieth century is "blu" or Reckitt's Blue, introduced in the missionaries' laundry baskets

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in the 1920s. And then there is *delek*, which is the word both for "white" in particular and for "color" in general—a linguistic affirmation perhaps that although red is sacred in these parts, a good white is also very precious. It is valued partly because it shows up well on both caves and bodies, partly because it is useful for painting both spears and coffins (one evening I found myself in the Aboriginal Town Camp in Jabiru, in the middle of Kakadu, and was taken to the home where a man had just died, and where his relatives were painting around the car with white paint) but partly because the best of it—a clay called huntite—is believed to be the feces of the Rainbow Snake.<sup>21</sup>

When I first heard this I was rather taken by the metaphor: the idea that the rainbow spectrum should somehow shimmer through the sky and over the earth, and that it should leave a dazzling white behind it. The truth was rather more prosaic. "Have you ever seen reptile droppings?" asked Alex Dudley, a ranger with whom I discussed the myths one evening. I hadn't, I admitted. So with his penlight we went hunting for gecko droppings, and soon found some on the glass dome of a Telstra phone box. They looked like little white slugs. A python's droppings are bigger, he said, making a shape in his hand that suggested feces the size of a tennis ball. "Imagine what the Rainbow Serpent could do after a good meal."

A few mornings later I was disconsolate—I had returned to the permit office and no progress had been made. "Thompson invited me," I said. "How do we know?" was the answer. I knew no Oenpelli phone numbers except for the arts center telephone, which rang and rang. I asked the woman whether she could try again, and went for a long walk to think about what I was going to do instead in order to learn more about this elusive paint. During the walk I bumped into a guide who specialized in animal tours. "You'd better go to the buffalo farm," he said. "Patsy will show you how colors work." Which is why the next morning I found myself pulling up to what appeared to be a deserted homestead at the end of long tracks guarded by plenty of "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" and

## COLOR

"Attention: Electric Fence" signs. It was a strange place: there were huge bits of iron everywhere—red and raw as if a container ship had rusted in the desert. I got out of the car and looked around. It was one of those mornings that shimmer with heat and silence, warning that it is going to be hot. There were flies buzzing around a buffalo horn that had been neatly sawed in several places and left lying on the ground, exposing blood and marrow, and everywhere there was the sweet smell of the abattoir.

Just when it seemed as if there was nobody there at all, Patsy and her husband Dave appeared from a shed. Patsy was born in Arnhemland and had grown up in a traditional community; Dave was a white Australian who had been a ranger for many years and was now managing the farm as a live larder for the local Aboriginals. When they wanted meat they would come and get it from him. Patsy had been married to a man in Maningrida, a coastal settlement in the heart of Arnhemland, but when he died she was pursued by a man she disliked. "My uncle Paddy said marry Dave, so I did."

Patsy was quiet at first, then she warmed up. Later she told me why she was so sad: her younger brother had died the Sunday before. He had been thirty-one and one of the last true bushmen, I heard from someone in town later. He had also not been a drinker. On that Saturday night he had seen a cat in the darkness, and the next morning he was dead. He had had an argument with a close relative a year back, Patsy said, and shrugged. In our different ways we both paused to picture a world that encompassed sorcery and revenge. She agreed to take me into the bush, to show me how she finds the dyes for baskets. We drove for several kilometers past electric fences that Dave had promised he would switch off—and as Patsy leapt out of the car with her axe and started digging up a small bush lying near one of them, I prayed that he had remembered. "Yellow color," she explained. "And red too." I asked what she meant, but she said she would show me later. She also showed me how she found gray from the green fruit of the kapok tree,

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which contained gray feathery intestines also used to stuff mattresses in the old days.

Breakfast was the white heart of a sand palm—succulent and bittersweet—and for “jam” we ate bush apples and red ants with green bottoms that were so full of vitamin C they tasted like stings. As I looked out for buffalo (which apparently could be dangerous) Patsy chopped down half a tree to make a forked stick, and then started hooking out the leaves of a pandanus tree—a palm with long spiky leaves bursting out from it like wild thick hair. This was the raw material for making baskets, she said, and when we returned to the farm we sat on a mat made of corrugated iron and she showed me how to strip the leaves, separating the soft underside from the hard top. She completed fifty to my one, but we sat companionably for an hour or so. Her puppy was getting tangled up in all the leaves. Patsy smacked him and then hugged him and then smacked him again. Suddenly a dinosaur crossed the path near us. “That’s just Stumpy,” she said, laughing at my look of alarm. Stumpy was a goanna—a meter-long lizard with a fierce face that gives a good clue to his general disposition, and no tail, having lost it in a fight.

Patsy took the roots of the yellow bush—which she called *anjundum*—and scraped off the skin. She divided them between two saucepans and started to boil them with the stripped pandanus. All my many wasted pandanus-stripping attempts were then gathered up and burned into ashes on our corrugated mat. “This is the red one,” she said, adding the ashes to one of the pots. “And this is the yellow one,” she added, pointing to the other. I realized that *anjundum* had a similar characteristic to pieces of ochre, in that the yellow ones could be transformed into red through cooking—although for the dyes it was a matter of adding some kind of alkali, like wood ash, and not just heat. She showed me a book: Penny Tweedie’s *Spirit of Arnhemland*—which contained photographs of a boy called Jazmin being decorated for a ceremony, his face

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sprayed from a man's mouth with white ochre, rather like the technique of hand painting I had seen in the caves, and his thin chest painted with a singlet of yellow, white and red ochre stripes.

Another picture showed a ceremonial dilly bag on the back of an elder. It was cylindrical, hard like a basket, and covered in white, red and yellow diamonds. I suddenly realized how strongly the natural dye colors mirror the ochres—red, white, yellow and black. "Dangerous," Patsy commented casually, flicking through the pages. "Women can't see this," she said, pointing at other pictures. I asked her whether it was dangerous for us to see the pictures. "No, we can see the photos, just can't see in real life," she explained, suggesting that by the very act of being set up for a photograph, the subjects had suspended their sacredness for the camera. Her sense of danger was reinforced by stories of women being killed for looking at ceremonies. "It happened before whitefellas came," she said. "But even now too," she added pensively. "Maybe."

Three days later my permit was turned down again: I realized I might not get my interviews. I had been circling carefully around both ochre and Arnhemland. I had talked to people who used it for hunting, and seen how it was still used for funerals. I had seen the colors that women use to imitate sacred patterns. But now it was time to meet some painters. "There's a good mob down Barunga way: they do painting," said a man I met at the Jabiru Social Club. So I called them. The Beswick and Barunga areas are in a protected area to the south-east of Kakadu. Could I come? How could I request a permit? I asked the arts coordinator, David Lane. "You've got a permit," he said generously. "Come down when you like." And yes, he confirmed, they did use natural ochres. "We'll take you to find them if you want."

I hired the only available four-wheel-drive in the area—a huge Nissan Patrol that made me feel I was Queen of the Road. When I arrived at Beswick, which was at the end of a red dust road so well made I felt a bit of a fraud in my grand car, I found a pleasant rural

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community of about five hundred people. There were picket fences and a well-tended playground and community center, with big houses set off the road and surrounded by grass and old mattresses. Beswick had been built in the 1940s when there was an emergency relocation of Aboriginal people from the coastal areas after the Japanese started bombing. Some had returned to Arnhemland but many had stayed, although some still dreamed of going home—and one of those dreamers was Tom Kelly.

Tom—a man in his sixties with a timeless etched face—was sitting on the porch of the main offices of Beswick. He had been a hand on a cattle station for many years but he had retired to Beswick to make and play didgeridoos—or “bamboos” as they call them in the creole that the people (who come from seven language groups) tend to use. “Tom’s one of the best,” David Lane told me. “He’s travelled the world with his digge.” Tom nodded matter-of-factly. “Been around,” he murmured. His group, the White Cockatoos, had been to many international music festivals, although now his dream was only to go back to live in Manguingida—the Arnhemland community where he was born—before his wife became too ill. Of all the places he had visited he’d liked America the best, especially meeting “them Indians,” who, he said, “also paint with ochre like us.”

He and David first showed me the didgeridoos. The stick-like instruments were covered in stories and pictures of lilies and file snakes and turtles in different ochre colors. One was decorated with a series of concentric red circles filled with white dashes, all on a black background. It represented water, Tom said, and the dashes were the effect of leaves falling on a waterhole. “It’s not country,” he said. “We don’t paint country on bamboos. Just pictures.”

He and two relatives—Abraham Kelly and Tango Lane Birrell—were to take me to find ochre from a nearby source called Jumped Up Creek, and suddenly my Nissan no longer seemed like an embarrassing overestimation of the terrain. Ten minutes out of town we turned off the main road onto what they said was a track, but I

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had my doubts. We churned up spiky spinifex for about a kilometer when Tom suddenly told us to stop. So we stopped in what seemed the middle of nowhere, got out, and suddenly I realized we were standing in a giant paintbox. The dried-up creek bed didn't just have one color, it had dozens, all combinations of the basic four colors—dark red hematite, lemon yellow, white pipeclay and black manganese that looked like chewing gum spat out by dinosaurs and left to ossify. The colored stones and pebbles were strewn in every direction. You could pick up almost any of them and you had paint in your hands.

Abraham found a big flat white stone from beyond the creek. That was to be our palette and canvas, and Tango—who had a water bottle with him—showed me how to pour water on to it then take a stone and rub it vigorously over the water to make it into pigment. The stones had the right combination of clay and color to make painting easy; they were even smoother than my little Italian stone. Is this what they use for the didgeridoos? I wondered. "Yeah," said Abraham. "We used to," said Tango. "Now we use acrylics. Ochre needs a vehicle, it's too far to walk. We had a vehicle before but the engine got buggered."

Beswick is the last domain in the area to the south of Arnhemland that is considered culturally "intact." Its inhabitants still organize initiation ceremonies, with boys going into the bush for four or five months to prepare. "We've only got five or six old men left now to teach the young ones," Tango said. In all the settlements there were problems, he said. "Ganja, petrol-sniffing, all that." But one of the biggest problems for cultural life was that the old men were dying. "Me, I'm forty-eight years old. If I don't get anyone to teach me then I'll fade away, the whole thing will just fade away." The multicolored stones of Jumped Up Creek were used for both art and ceremonies, Tom said. "But we don't tell you about ceremony," he added firmly. "It's secret."

"Secret" is such a vulnerable thing in Aboriginal communities today. The stories have been passed on only with difficulty. Yet they

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have probably never been so important—not only in the religious sense, but also in the sense of identity. What meaning do stories and paintings about land and country actually have for a sedentary person who rarely sees the places they refer to? Today, when there are so few stories for men like Tom Kelly to pass on, it is important to pay attention to what is left, and to respect the very thin blanket of secrecy that can be spread over them. Things were not in fact so secret sixty years ago, when there were more stories and they were told fairly freely to anthropologists.

## ALICE SPRINGS

Theodor Strehlow was the son of a missionary; he grew up with Aranda playmates, spoke the language fluently, and kept diaries and accounts of the ceremonies and traditions that he witnessed. His papers and pictures are held in the Museum of Central Australia, just outside the center of Alice Springs and an overnight bus journey from Beswick. To access them I turned away from the dark display cases of stuffed possums and exotic rock samples, and went through a nondescript door into a triangular room with space for four chairs, a telephone and what looked like a two-way mirror. I felt as if I were in a spy film, or entering the secret headquarters of a cult.

I sat down in a chair and looked at the telephone for a while, wondering whether I had a good enough reason to dial 11-111 and ask to consult the files in order to learn more about ochre. Then—and as I write this a few months later I'm surprised I did this—I stood up and left the room without even picking up the phone. These were secret documents, so secret that in 1992 they had been confiscated from Strehlow's widow's home and put into the safe-keeping of the museum, for whenever the Aboriginal elders or scholars wanted to consult them. It wasn't right for me even to try to see them, I decided. Whatever I was to find out about red ochre would either be things people told me in full knowledge of why I was asking, or things I found in public libraries, open to anyone.

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Even if that meant I knew less, it meant I knew it fairly. And, to my surprise, that afternoon I found in the reference section of Alice Springs's public library some of the information I had been looking for. It was an account—written up in Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*—of a sacred ritual that might help me understand why red ochre was so sacred.

In the hot summer of 1933, Strehlow was invited by four elders of the Loritja tribe to see a rain ceremony at a place called Horseshoe Bend, not far from Alice. He described how the men—having approached the cave banging shields and boomerangs to warn the Ancestors of their arrival—pulled three sacred rain sticks or *tjurunga* from the bottom of the cave. Two were slim poles, about the size and shape of didgeridoos, representing rain brothers who had travelled through the Central Desert country at the beginning of time. The third was smaller, and symbolized the brothers' two grandchildren: greedy infants screaming for blood.

The thirst of even the most hemoglobin-challenged of ritual objects was satisfied that afternoon. In order to honor the rain ancestors, the four blood donors cheerfully set to work tying their arms and opening the veins on the forearms, Strehlow wrote. They all had problems getting a good flow and spent the first five minutes cutting, splintering glass chips, and pulling at the opening of the cuts. But when the jets came they came quickly, spraying the *tjurunga* and then drizzling on top, bottom and sides of the cave entrance. It was, the missionary's son noted, the greatest quantity of blood he had ever seen sprinkled about for a ceremony.

The account is written in a very matter-of-fact way, but Strehlow added in a footnote that he had to brace himself for this "orgy of bleeding" by downing several good brandies, and even then he had to watch it through the lens of his Graflex camera, standing a short distance away, so he did not feel too sick. It was a hot day and a small gully, and he found the smell of blood quite overpowering. He was told that these three *tjurunga* were unique among the Loritja in that they were never painted with red ochre, but instead

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had to be refreshed with human blood at frequent intervals. Later he speculated that the usual practice of smearing *tjurunga* with red ochre might be a substitute for covering them with blood, although this was, he emphasized, purely a guess.

When the ceremony ended, the bloodstained sand was tramped until all signs had been wiped away; each man had to scrape the marks from his arms, and wash himself before returning to camp. It was important that the women shouldn't smell the blood, Strehlow noted. I was reminded of a story I had heard a couple of weeks before, whispered over a beer by a man in the Northern Territory. He knew a man, he said, who had been to an initiation ceremony in the mid-1990s, and had carelessly left the ceremonial red ochre glistening on his arm so that the women could see it. He had carried something dangerous into the world where it could not be contained, and the penalty for that was death. "They did it with spears," the man whispered, glancing melodramatically over his shoulder.

In the same library was a book about the Dreaming places of Alice Springs—which directed me to the road running along the Todd River (so dry that there is an annual regatta where the racers run, carrying the boats) and leading to the casino. The map recorded it as Barrett Drive; the Aboriginals preferred to call it Broken Promises Drive. When it was first proposed, the Aboriginal guardians gave permission for it to be built—as long as it wriggled round a spot that was known as the Caterpillar Dreaming because it included a long mound believed to mark the space where the caterpillar Ancestor rested beneath the earth. But the road builders were greedy; the wriggle would cost dollars. They blocked the road off and a few months later opened it unrepentantly—with several meters cut off the tail of the caterpillar. The wound was still there. From the road I could see a long mound about three meters high and five meters wide curling away into the distance, covered with eucalyptus and grass and signposts warning people to stay away. The mound ended abruptly at the road, where it had been chopped,

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and I saw something glinting in the debris. In fact I saw a lot of things glinting. It turned out that the "caterpillar" was made of a rock that flaked off with shiny silica dandruff. This rock on the road to the casino was not just ordinary stone, it was stone that changed color as you moved. Once again I saw how the "sacred" was something that was full of gleaming colors.

Everywhere in Alice Springs you can find Aboriginal designs. They are on logos and place mats, T-shirts and didgeridoos, and, of course, they are on canvases—in the dozens of art shops that line the streets of the town center. There were a few of the Northern Territory ochre paintings I had seen at the beginning of my journey, and there were others that seemed to represent some kind of stylistic transition—by artists who came from the Kimberleys to the north-west of Alice, who still used ochre but in ways that involved large areas of paint, rather than either dotting or stripes. One of the most powerful of these was a man called Rover Thomas, who lived between 1926 and 1998 in Warmum, Turkey Creek, just to the west of the Darwin–Alice road, and about halfway along it. His paintings look like pieces of kangaroo skin stretched taut with pins of white pigment. The work seems less a painting of the country than a kind of wrapping up of the country—rather as Christo did with the Reichstag in Berlin. He uses a deep chestnut brown and his skies are the color of bitter chocolate. He always uses natural pigments, often mixed with bush gum and applied to marine ply.

But most of the paintings in Alice were, quite naturally, from the Central Desert. They were bright acrylic canvases in patterns of dots and curls and splashes and concentric circles. If they had been from Europe or America they would have been given labels like "abstract expressionist" or "neopointillist," and the influence of such artists as Miró and Picasso would have been discussed in unending detail. But they were from Australia with their own distinctive artistic inheritance, so although those comparisons have been made, they have mostly been allowed just to stand for themselves. Many of the

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paintings had a title like "Two Snakes Dreaming" or "Dingo Dreaming," and some included explanations of the iconography—that, for example, a concentric circle meant a waterhole, or that an oval shape was a shield, or that little curled lines represented men sitting at fires. These were some of the stories that had so intrigued Bruce Chatwin, in his journeys for the book that became *Songlines*, describing the way Aborigines traditionally conceptualize Australia as a series of sung stories, criss-crossing the land.

The paintings, when you look at them for more than a few minutes, seem to be an exercise in optical effects—like one of those Magic Eye games, with an obvious picture in the front and another picture "behind" it which you can see if you focus away from the paper. Like the shiny red ochres that I had not seen but had heard of in Arnhemland and South Australia, the paintings from the Central Desert seemed almost like another way of flipping reality. In their case by dotting it into non-existence.

I began to recognize some of the different artists—particularly the more famous ones. Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, whose work was made up of bold squares, either set inside each other or spiralling geometrically into a central point. Then there was Rover Thomas, of course. And the Petyarre sisters—Ada Bird, Gloria and several others, much of whose work is made of small, swiftly painted dashes in contrasting colors such as green and purple, giving the effect of a weeping willow shivering in the wind. Listening quietly to conversations in different galleries, I learned that "Glorias" were getting more expensive, while "two Ronnies" cost about the same as a car nowadays. "Though good Ronnies are so hard to get nowadays," was the sad comment from the dealer I was eavesdropping on. "He's having domestic problems."

## UTOPIA

The Petyarre family comes from a place called Utopia. Perhaps it was the name or perhaps it was the art from that Central Desert

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settlement—with its bold control of color contrasts—which intrigued me. But I was determined to go there, and was fortunate enough to get an invitation from Simon Turner, the arts administrator who works as a go-between connecting dealers and artists. The settlement is about 100 kilometers north-east of Alice Springs. To get there from the Darwin Highway you turn east onto a dusty track and north onto an even dustier one. For kilometer after kilometer the land stays flat, a dry plain of gum trees. Then there is a tiny rise. Just 10 meters elevation or less, but suddenly you are in another world. The Aboriginals describe it, when they do, as the Mountain Lizard Dreaming or the Bush Plum Dreaming, and they tell its stories in layers and paint them in dots. With my stranger's eye, I knew only that the country was suddenly greener and lusher. The land had lumped itself into rocky formations like stone citadels, or entrance gates to another country. In a strange way it felt as if I had really arrived somewhere.

And then, a few kilometers later, I did indeed arrive somewhere. Utopia was named a long time ago before there was a settled community here, and so the name was not as ironic as it may have appeared. It was certainly a strange, dislocated place. It was a scattered series of seemingly unplanned houses or "camps" separated by trees and tracks and "humpies," which were blocks of corrugated iron surrounded by mattresses and bits of dirty clothing, where many people stayed outside on the warmer nights. There was a convenience store—containing the strangest mixture of highly priced items such as televisions combined with cheap ones like white bread and fried food. And there was a playground with broken equipment. One swing had curled up on top of the frame and begun to rust up there. Helped by two half-naked children, I prodded it with a stick until it swung down again. They grinned and jumped on it. The job had taken only ten minutes, but nobody had bothered to do it.

Utopia is what is called a decentralized community, consisting of sixteen outstations. I had been invited to the main one, called

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Yuendumu. It was the first dry Aboriginal community I had visited (which made it safer, especially for children and women who lived there), although the place had other problems, largely due to boredom and lethargy. It is a terrible thing to lose your land, but when (as in traditional Aboriginal culture) that land is not only physical but also an embodiment of the spiritual, it is hard to find anything to take its place. The nomadic life has its own purpose to it: without the need to walk, what do you do? On my first morning I went for a walk and some women beckoned me over to their "camp." From the outside it looked like a house with a verandah but inside it was like some of the air-raid bunkers I used to break into in my childhood: bleak and dank, covered in graffiti and radiating a sense of unkemptness. One woman had a black eye. The others had invited me over because they wanted to see whether I had any clout with the arts administrator and, more importantly, whether I could use it to get them new canvases. "Finished this one," one said, pointing to a painting that showed her "country" in tiny dot patterns of bright greens and whites. "Without a canvas, nothing to do."

Later I went down with Simon to the arts center—a tumble-down place, although recently built. So many things in these communities age too quickly. The Formica cupboard doors were hanging off their hinges and rubbish threatened to take over; there was a sign stating (on behalf of Arapuntja Artists Inc.) that no dogs were allowed in the studio. This one-room building was not intended to be a retail point—few individual art-buyers reach Utopia—but a place where art was made, although now it is more like a place where canvases are doled out and cash transactions arranged.

Utopia was the country of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, dubbed "the old lady," a former horseback rider in the stock camps who became one of Australia's most famous female artists (whose paintings of her country were used as evidence in land rights hearings). Many of the artists of Utopia are women, and it seemed that most of them were at the arts center that morning handing in their

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latest works, and lobbying for new canvases, while their toddlers and babies played on the dirty floor of the center. The paintings were made up of pointillist dots, and the effect was rather similar to looking at spring meadows full of flowers—but with blurred eyes and from a vantage point high above them. “What do you want to say here?” Simon asked each of them as she handed in her completed painting. “White is flowers,” Polly Ngalr said. What kind of flower? “Yam flower. And yellow is seeds.” What kind? “Yam seed,” she said, being patient. Some of the titles of the paintings shifted during the morning from *Emu Tucker* to *Bush Plum Dreaming*, and back again. Nobody seemed too bothered once the price had been set and the negotiations started for another fresh canvas.

Amy Nelson Napangardi hadn’t been given a canvas last time, so this time she was desperate. She has custodianship for the Witchdoctor Dreaming, which describes how bush medicine can be found. “Like that one,” she said, pointing to the Bush Plum Dreaming someone else had painted—interlapping dot patches in pinks and yellows. “But my colors are not pink,” she added emphatically, and explained that the Witchdoctor Dreaming used just four colors—yellow, red, white and brown. That morning I had found myself desperate to somehow understand the paintings better—to understand what made them represent “country” or a Dreaming story, to appreciate them for more than their (often spectacular) color contrasts. I had hoped that perhaps by knowing what was not allowed, or at least not appropriate I could understand the paintings better. “Why not pink?” I asked her. “‘Cos whitefella buyers don’t like it,” she said.

And this is one of the curiosities of this extraordinary art movement. The buyers seem to want a sense of “authenticity” and yet nobody is quite sure what that means, nor indeed what it should mean. The fact that the painting is done by Aboriginal people seems to be vital—when, in 1977, it was revealed that the “Aboriginal” artist Eddie Burrup was in fact an eighty-two-year-old white woman called Elizabeth Durack, there was national out-

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rage—and that it is made by Aboriginal people who somehow have some insight into nature seems to make it even more “valuable.” The fact that many “whitefella buyers” demand paintings in the natural colors of the land (ochre colors, although in acrylic versions of the original earth) also suggests they are searching for that ever elusive authenticity—a country and a history embodied in the canvas of a painting available in an art gallery or auction house. In Alice Springs I had visited one gallery advertising the work of an artist “who had come in from the desert.” Somehow his work was seen to have more integrity because he was a nomad—by buying it, or having it, there was a sense of being part of a world that has now disappeared. Yet in truth, as I would learn later from the man who helped start it, the painting styles of the Central Desert Art Movement are actually combinations of Aboriginal patterns and colors and the visions of white art administrators. And the two influences can scarcely be separated anymore.

Gloria and Ada Petyarre were away from Utopia—invited by art galleries to tour with their own paintings. But their sister, Margaret Turner Petyarre, was there at the arts center. So I sat down next to her on the floor and—struggling to understand what it was to paint a “Dreaming” rather than a mere representation of a story—asked her several questions about what the paintings meant. Suddenly she looked at me kindly: “You gotta garden, right? You must have nice flowers in your garden; lovely flowers?” I nodded, not wanting to go into the issues of space limitations in Hong Kong. “Well then, you know; that’s what this is,” she said. “Flowers.” I felt rather foolish, almost as if I had pointed to a landscape painting in a European art gallery and asked for its meaning, only to be told that it was trees and water and hills. Couldn’t I see?

My question hadn’t been entirely misguided, of course. This art, like the shine of the ochre it was originally painted in, is elusive. Yes, it is about texture and tone and contrast and technique, but it is also about something else, something I couldn’t quite grasp. Sometimes, in my travels through the Outback meeting artists,

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dealers and dyers, I had the fleeting impression that we were not talking about art at all, but about the universality of the human spirit. And then that feeling would disappear again and the talk would be of dollars and four-wheel-drives.

On the way out of Utopia I went to see Greenie and Kathleen Purvis at Boundary Bore, about ten kilometers away, past a shallow lake that stretched through the middle of this parched land. Greenie had the famous name but it was his wife, Kathleen, who was doing the painting, sitting in the sunshine on the ground, surrounded by slobbering dogs, while her husband dozed in the shade of his "humpy" or corrugated-iron windbreaker. These two old people have a house—quite a big one—but as Kathleen explained they don't use it much "because it's full of dogs." Unless it's too cold they like to sleep outside, on swag mattresses under the moonlight: given the choice, I thought, I would do the same. There are few things as spectacular as the night sky in the Outback. They looked poor, but their work was selling well. They were planning to get a satellite television and a Toyota was being delivered the next day. Four-wheel-drives have been a popular means of payment for Aboriginal desert art—in the early days it was second-hand Holdens from a car dealership in Alice, now it is new Toyotas—and in many ways this is appropriate. In the past, the act of painting (as body art or on sand) was one way of passing on the wisdom and the maps, so other people could know both the land and what lies beneath it. It seems right that today the act of painting should still help Aboriginals reclaim the land. Even if it is from behind a steering wheel.

I had seen how the Central Desert painting movement had not only transformed people's lives but also how it had provided a language through which outsiders could try to understand something of Aboriginal culture, as well as helping to keep some of the traditional stories and Dreamings alive in people's memories. And I was intrigued by a tale I had heard again and again about how the movement had started in the early 1970s, with the gift of paint.

## WHEN THE COLORS WERE TAKEN AWAY

Geoffrey Bardon was a young man full of ideas and ideals when he went to the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya in 1971 as an art teacher turned social studies teacher. "A dreamer in a blue VW Kombi van," he once described himself. When he left that place eighteen months later he was in some ways a broken man, as his story would tell. But in that short time he had helped start up perhaps one of the most astonishing art movements of the twentieth century.

I contacted him, and flew up to the small town north of Sydney where he now lives with his wife and two sons. He picked me up from the airport in a VW Kombi van—the kind of van you can just get into and travel wherever you want to go, with your swag mattress in the back. I commented on how he was still driving the same type of vehicle he had been using so many years before. It was a cherished possession, he told me: a reminder of the days before things went wrong.

When we got to his home, we sat on the porch overlooking a garden full of gum trees and flowers, and talked for hours—although he sometimes found it hard, and we would stop and talk about something else. I wanted to learn about the paint, of course. But first he told me about Papunya. It was a hell on earth, he said. A shameful place that in just one year lost half of its population to disease, a so-called "community" where there were five tribal groups speaking at least five languages, trying to coexist and find a new purpose in life when everything they knew had been forbidden to them. It was as if the colors in their lives had been taken away along with their land, and all that was left was lethargy and depression. They were being administrated by arrogant white officials "in white socks"—most of whom, according to Bardon, did not care anything for their charges. "Some of them hadn't talked to a blackfellow in ten years," he said. And as for the 1,400 or so Aboriginal residents of Papunya, "they were retiring, withdrawn,

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and outnumbered," he remembered. "And they didn't have the kind of leaders anyone else understood, so they weren't properly represented." But as a teacher he was full of ideals and a desire to challenge the system. And although he knew that many of the children went to school only to get hot meals, he tried to teach them as well as he could.

At first the children's paintings were crude drawings of cowboys and Indians—mimicking the exciting films that were shown on a big screen at Papunya. But Bardon noticed that when they were out of school, talking and playing in the playground, they would draw designs—dots and semicircles and curvilinear lines—in the sand with their fingers and with sticks. So one day he asked them to draw their own designs, and with a little bit of persuasion they began to do so.

The old Pintupi tribesmen were watching, interested, as Bardon's lessons progressed. The children started calling him "Mr. Patterns" because of his insistence on neatness and careful presentation—and, as he says, it is hard to know just how much this kind of early guidance (from him and from the art coordinators who followed) influenced the work we see today. The elders had their own rich painting traditions that had in the distant past been concentrated on body and sand painting, with some more lasting ochre designs on the walls of caves and the sides of rocks. They had tried a few times to revive the practice. But they had almost no modern paints and no encouragement, and Bardon gave them both. And he did something extraordinary. He asked them what they wanted. "This was an amazing inquiry: I saw that in their faces. Nobody ever asked them what they wanted, they were always being told what to do. The slogan was that if you help one fellow you help them all . . . so nobody helped anybody at all." When Bardon asked them there *was* something the Pintupi elders wanted desperately: paint. And what they offered in exchange—what a delegation of men came over to Bardon's apartment and offered one evening—was to paint one of their sacred Dreamings on the gray

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concrete outside wall of the school. It was to be a work of art that was significant to the black people themselves, in contrast to much of what is painted today which as I had seen in Utopia is designed for white buyers.

The Honey Ant Dreaming (describing a story, or songline, that runs through Papunya from west to east and was felt to represent all the people of that troubled settlement) had three incarnations on the school wall. All the versions were in ochre colors, red, yellow and black, and all of them showed a long straight line with patterns of concentric circles posted along it at irregular distances, making it seem like string with enormous knots. The first version included little semicircular lines like double bananas, placed around the "knots," and representing the honey ant Ancestors. When it was finished, some elders were horrified that it revealed too many of their tribal secrets, and they held an emergency meeting. The next day the controversial curved lines were scrubbed off and replaced by very realistic little line drawings of ants. But this time it was Bardon who objected, saying he didn't like them: they were too much like "whitefella" painting. So on the third attempt, the "honey ants" were replaced by symbols that all parties agreed on. In retrospect they looked like little fast-food hamburgers, a yellow filling between red burger buns, but it was an important moment in the development of this new art movement. It was probably the first time that symbols had been deliberately swapped in order to show the "blanket" and yet keep the secrets that lay beneath it. In a way it marked the beginning of these dispossessed people finding a way of representing what was esoteric by something that was exoteric—something that was hidden by something that could be shown.

It was an amazing act of generosity for these men to paint their Dreaming—the representation of their layered system of knowledge—on the walls of a whitefellow building, Bardon said. "But few people really appreciated it. Nobody cared what they were doing." In those days he used to joke that with the industrial-strength glue

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he had provided to bind the colored poster paint, the Honey Ant Dreaming would last a thousand years. But it didn't, it lasted only until 1974, when a maintenance man, on someone's orders, painted over it with acrylics. If it existed today it would be one of Australia's greatest pieces of art.

The honey ant was just the beginning of the journey. A few men—like Old Mick Tjakamarra, or Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri or Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, whose names are now huge in the Aboriginal art world—started painting a few canvases in a converted storage area that they had fixed up like a cave. Bardon took the works into Alice Springs (about 250 kilometers to the east of Papunya), and to everyone's surprise came back with substantial amounts of money. Suddenly everyone went wild for materials. The crates that held the oranges for school break would be dismantled as soon as they had been emptied, and used as canvases; "people were painting on match-boxes and bits of board; anything," said Bardon, who remembered one day even using toothpaste as a primer to prepare the wooden planking, because he had run out of everything else. He used up the substantial poster paint supplies in the school and then ordered more. "They particularly liked the bright orange paint," he said. "They said it was from the land—it was the color of the ochre pits."

His first thought was to continue the tradition of painting in ochre or ochre-like colors, and one day he was taken by some of the Anmatjirra artists to a mine in the McDonnell Ranges to the north of Papunya. It is called Glen Helen and has river cliffs of yellow and white paint running through it, representing 700 million years of geological history. "I thought we could have truckloads of this stuff and big cauldrons of glue and we could paint the town red ochre." But the artists, despite being aware of this great natural paintbox, preferred to use non-traditional paints. Perhaps because they were brighter on the canvas, or smoother to use, or easier to find. But perhaps also because it made it less complicated for them to represent their Dreaming stories for outsiders if the materials themselves were not sacred but only represented sacred colors—

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like images in a mirror. It was almost as if by changing the paint, the designs had begun to lose the things that made them dangerous and powerful. It was also an immensely practical choice: as I had seen with Katherine and Greenie Purvis at Boundary Bore, much of the work is done outside. The advantage of acrylic-based paints is that they dry fast. Ochre mixed with linseed oil would be corrupted by red sand long before it dried.

The story of Papunya (the art movement was labelled Papunya Tula, with Tula meaning the meeting place of siblings or cousins) seems on the surface a simple and heart-warming tale of success despite the odds. Having been released from the pressure of being powerful, having even been released from the pressure of being ochre, ochre paintings became a way for dispossessed people to operate in their new environment, as well as also being extraordinarily moving works of art in their own right. But Bardon's story—partly told in his 1991 book *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*—has many layers too. And the ones below the sparkling surface are darker and more difficult.

At first it was exciting; he was selling the art in Alice, bringing back money—and later cars—for the painters. But within a few months, he said, things started turning bad, until they culminated in one terrible night that Bardon will never forget, and will still not talk about. The white administrators started to resent the fact that their "dispossessed" people began to have possessions. The paintings suddenly had a value, and as Bardon said: "Anything the Aboriginals had of value they had to be relieved of. It was that kind of place." One constant threat was that Kaapa Tjampitjimpa, one of the star artists and a respected man in the community, would be deported from Papunya. "They had a game with me, I can't be more emphatic than that." But Bardon kept selling the paintings, and returning with increasingly large amounts of cash for the artists. He started giving driving lessons on the air strip—although, as he said, the police discouraged Aboriginal men from having licenses, and nobody was granted one while he was there.

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And then there were more threats, with the superintendent telling Bardon that the paintings were by "government Aborigines" and were therefore "government paintings." One day, while Bardon was away from the settlement, an administrator went to visit the painters—to tell them that, of a consignment of paintings worth \$700 and left in Alice Springs, they were owed just \$21, with the rest deducted as expenses. When he came back, oblivious of the lies that had been spread, Bardon felt shunned by both white and black communities: "I couldn't have been more isolated than if I had gone to the South Pole on my own. There weren't even penguins for company."

The way he describes the end of his time in Papunya, it is like a bad dream—he fell sick, the Aboriginals began to distrust him and once even chanted the words "money, money, money" in their own languages outside the school in protest at what they felt was his perfidy. It seemed, he wrote later,<sup>22</sup> as if he was becoming quite separate from the artists and, in a way, even from himself. "From my window I'd see strange and wistful caravans of black faces coming back and forth along the spinifex tracks. I'd see someone I thought was one of the painters, and then whoever it was would walk away." It was finished, he knew, but it really ended late one night, when someone or several visitors knocked at his door and demanded to talk to him.

Whatever happened under the Southern Cross in the bush that night shocked him so much that he left Papunya in despair and in a hurry, and a few days later had a nervous breakdown and was admitted to the hospital. Thirty years later he has recovered from it, but the pain is still there. "There are certain things which can't be said, so I can't say them either," Bardon said as we sat companionably on the verandah looking out at his garden. "I'll stop now," he said. And we stopped; it wasn't right to look under the blanket of secrets anymore.

After you take off in a 747 from Sydney's International Airport it takes nearly five hours to leave Australian airspace, and I spent

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most of that time just gazing out at the bush below. From above, the whole desert is a strangely mesmerizing shimmering orange. Whenever a friend was asked what his favorite color was, he would say it was just that: the red of the Australian center, when you flew over it in the morning. From this bird's-eye perspective, the spinifex and other bushes made little dots on the landscape, just like so many of the Central Desert paintings I had seen. And from a plane the dried-up creeks and the curves of rocks turned into whorls and wiggles that no doubt had whole epic choral symphonies enclosed in them. But I had seen that before, and what I took back from this journey was something extra, something more complex.

It was a sense of ancientness, in a way—the ancientness that had so charmed me with that little yellow stone in Italy—but it was also a sense of the land as a conscious thing. And about how although on the top there is, along with all the beauty, a great deal of misery—alcoholism, racism, ill-treatment of women, and that terrible dull sense of boredom and pointlessness that I had seen in my travels—there was still a sense that below that ochre surface there is a different reality. It is a reality that the best red paint and perhaps the best art can give a glimpse of, but just a glimpse. Old Bill Neidje from Oenpelli had tried to explain its elusiveness. We don't know what it is, he had said, in words that were recorded in his book *Kakadu Man*, "but something underneath, under the ground."<sup>23</sup>

Eight months after my journey to find ochre, Christie's held an auction of Aboriginal artworks in Melbourne. "What a night," art dealer Nina Bove wrote to me a few days later. "The atmosphere was electric." There were a few big sales that night—of "Emilies" and "Clifford Possums" and "Ronnie"—but the biggest interest was when Rover Thomas's 1991 ochre-and-gum painting of *All That Big Rain Coming from Topside* was brought onto the stage. It is an extraordinarily powerful depiction of something elemental: the white dots pouring down the ochre-brown canvas, seeming to

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settle for a moment in a ridge and then cascading to the bottom in floods. And that is a fair description of what happened in the auction room that night: a cautious start increasing in momentum until it reached an unprecedented high tide.

There were several big foreign buyers pushing up the price, but every time they did there was a phone bidder who matched them until it reached 786,625 Australian dollars and the hammer came down. As everyone was speculating on who the mystery buyer was, Wally Caruana of the National Gallery of Australia slipped back into the reserved seating section. He must have been shaken by his own actions, but from a telephone in the downstairs bar he had just paid more money than anybody had ever paid before for an Aboriginal artwork in order to keep the ochre painting (quickly dubbed by the local press *All That Big Dough Coming from Top-side*) for Australia.

The modern art movement that had started in a place that wasn't loved, pioneered by people who weren't valued, had come a long way from the early days of Papunya. People who buy Aboriginal art are looking for many things: for movement and texture and tonal hue and stories. But they are also, I believe (in this coming together of paint, canvas and of the patterns made by people sitting under humpies in the desert and surrounded by dogs and four-wheel-drives but with glory in their minds) looking for something else. They are looking for country. They are looking for the crock of earth at the beginning of the Rainbow Serpent. And yet they don't have to look so carefully anymore to see how it glitters.

## NOTES

- Eaters*, now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Dorn, "The Arles Period," in *Van Gogh Face to Face*, p. 145.
13. Shackleford, "Van Gogh in Paris," in *Van Gogh Face to Face*, p. 96.
  14. Van Gogh realized that good-quality paint was vital. And when (in the few months in 1889 between cutting off his ear and admitting himself to a mental hospital) he was inspired by the freshness of springtime in Provence, he wrote a letter to his brother Theo, urging him to purchase paints in Paris and send them without delay. "The flowering time is over so soon and you know how this kind of subject delights everybody," he wrote.
  15. Personal interview. Michael Skalka, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
  16. The "second-best bed" was the one that a sixteenth-century married couple used. Their "best bed" was the one reserved for guests. Shakespeare made the expression famous because he left the "second-best bed" to his wife Anne in his will. Historians are divided about whether this was an unloving legacy, or whether on the contrary it may have been a sexy one, with him wanting to honor their nights spent together. The one in the Birthplace is not the original.
  17. Morris, *The Lesser Arts of Life*, an address delivered before the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, London, 1882.
  18. In the seventh century, St. John of Damascus said: "I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake, and who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter."

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1. Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, p. 15.
2. Thompson, *The Materials of Medieval Painting*, p. 98.
3. Thom, *Becoming Brave: The Path to Native American Manhood*, p. 43.
4. Marshall, *The Red Ochre People*, p. 41.
5. Sagona, *Bruising the Red Earth*, p. 133.
6. Papunya Tula: *Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, August–November 2000. This was the first major retrospective of the Central Desert Art Movement since it began in the 1970s, and was held as part of the Sydney 2000 Olympics.
7. I am indebted to McBryde, "Goods from another country," Sagona, *Bruising the Red Earth* and Jones, "Red Ochre Expeditions," in Pa-

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- pers Presented to the South Australian Museum, for this section on ochre expeditions.
8. Peterson and Lampert, "A Central Australian Ochre Mine," in *Records of the Australian Museum*, vol. 37, p. 1-9.
  9. Similar ceremonial trading patterns existed all over the continent. Ronald and Catherine Berndt described how in north-east Arnhemland in the early twentieth century the Gunwinggu people of Oenpelli traded spears with people to the east; nets with the people from the northern coast; European goods and bamboo spears with those to the south-west; and two varieties of red ochre with those to the south, near the Katherine River. Berndt and Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, p. 131.
  10. Jones, op. cit., p. 10.
  11. Masey, *Port Augusta Dispatch and Flinders Advertiser*, June 9, 1882. Quoted in Jones, op. cit., p. 12.
  12. One story of acrylic paints suggests part of the early development of this medium may have happened in Australia. The Australian artist Ainslie Roberts was apparently allergic to both turpentine and linseed oil, so his friend Sidney Nolan suggested he try PVA glue, which he did. This was later to develop into acrylic paints, an important breakthrough in the story of house and artists' paints. Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts and the Dreamtime*, p. 81.
  13. Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, p. 164.
  14. This version is adapted from the story of Kirkin in Smith, *Myths and legends of the Australian Aborigines*.
  15. The *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2001, quotes Noel Nannup, Aboriginal chief executive in the West Australian government's Aboriginal Heritage Unit, saying that if the Dreaming trails were not walked for a while, they would hibernate. In order to walk them again, they had to be awoken by stones that were sensitive to the earth's magnetic field, causing the pathways to reveal themselves. A lightning storm was considered the best condition in which to "feel" the trails, he said.
  16. The Tiwi kinship names translate to the rule that the only cousin you can marry is your father's sister's child—all other first cousins are taboo.
  17. One nineteenth-century missionary to the Tiwi islands apparently tried to ban traditional funeral rituals, but as he travelled across from Bathurst Island to Melville to protest about a funeral, he fell out of

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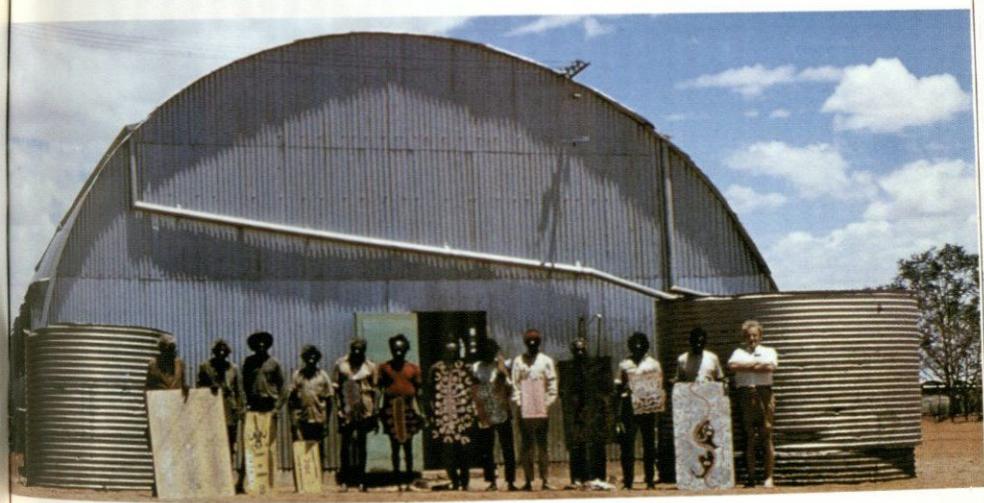
- his boat. It was proof, the Tiwi people decided, that their Ancestors were worth paying attention to.
18. Hulley, *The Rainbow Serpent*, pp. 21–2.
  19. Harley, *Artists' Pigments c. 1600–1835*, p. 120.
  20. Diabetes and kidney failure are two of the worst health problems for older Aboriginal people in Australia today.
  21. According to Chaloupka there are three main white pigment Dreaming sites in the north-west plateau: Gundjilhdjil near the Kanarra shelter; Wamanui in the land of the Mandjarrwalwal; and—the most prized of all—Majjarnalggun, along the Gamadeer river near Maburinj.
  22. Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, p. 45.
  23. Neidje, *Australia's Kakadu Man*, p. 48.

## BLACK AND BROWN

1. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Artists*, part II, p. 121.
2. Bomford, Kirby, Leighton and Roy, *Impressionism*, pp. 169 and 71.
3. Julian Bell, *What Is Painting?*, p. 11.
4. Bahn, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art*, p. 144.
5. ibid., p. 109.
6. Chauvet, Deschamps and Hillaire, *Chauvet Cave, the Discovery of the World's Oldest Paintings*, p. 57.
7. Bahn, op. cit., p. ix.
8. The Coate family grows about 1.5 million willow stems a year on 85 acres. Half are burned into charcoal, the rest are used for baskets, picnic hampers and (for old times' sake) a few traditional lobster pots.
9. For this section on graphite I am indebted to Petroski, *The Pencil*; Dave Bridge, "Wad"; Carvalho, *Forty Centuries of Ink*; and information from the Keswick Pencil Museum.
10. The den of the graphite thieves was the George Hotel in Keswick. The pub is still there: you can sit by the fire on an old panelled settle marked 1737—as I did, to thaw out—and imagine the smugglers plotting how to get their stolen haul to Flanders while the King's red-coated soldiers tried to catch them red- (or black-) handed. The George is a good bar for such subversion: it has three exits apart from the front door. One exit passes through a Jacobean doorway into the kitchens, and there are two different doors through which to escape from the stable-yard at the back.



Bottles of powdered pigments from Winsor & Newton.



(above) Artists at Papunya,  
Australia.

(right) A natural paint box at  
Jumped Up Creek in the  
Northern Territory of Australia.

