



Acknowledgements

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The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovative, experimental and performative contemporary art and design. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the SASA Gallery has been developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, UniSA in a national and international context.

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Images:

Front: *The Toyota*, Roma Butler, Ivy Laidlaw, Tjawina Roberts, Jennifer Mitchell, 2015

Back: *Kapi Ungkupayi*, Roma Butler, 2013

Insert: *Self-portrait*, Roma Butler, 2015

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Kapi Ungkupayi/He gave us water

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SASA GALLERY

Kapi Ungkupayi Mary Knights

People are here for a reason, living out here on the lands, they have to look after their country. They're not asking for lots, they just want to live out here, teach their kids. Why do they want to close the communities? They should close the gap, not the communities... If they are talking about closing the communities and moving us away from here, they are going to destroy our culture, and the land, they are going to push people away, and all of the companies are going to come here, take over and just start mining. They just thinking about money...

...You wouldn't like it if we tell you to move. It is not a life-style choice. We're here for a reason. The people are here for a reason – to look after their land and their culture and they want to keep that strong.¹

– Chris Reid, Chair, Irrunytju Council, Wingellina Protest Speech, 29 April 2015

Senior Pitjantjatjara artists Roma Butler, Ivy Laidlaw, Jennifer Mitchell, Tjawina Roberts and Mrs Woods have presented this exhibition in order to tell a new tjukurpa and as a protest against funding cuts that threaten the existence of remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia.

In response to the Federal Government's decision in 2014 to withdraw funding and devolve responsibility for essential services to the states, WA Premier Colin Barnett declared that his government would not pick up the on-going costs, accepted a final one-off payment of \$90 million, and warned of the immanent closure of between 100 and 150 of the 254 remote Indigenous communities in his state. Approximately 12,000 people live in these communities.² Without essential services – water, power, sewerage and basic infrastructure – the capacity for anangu to live on their own country, self-determine priorities and future directions, maintain traditional languages and keep the spiritual, cultural and economic connections with their ancestral homelands strong, will be undermined.

There is great uncertainty across the desert about who will be affected. Details of a leaked Federal Government document titled 'Priority Investment Communities - WA' drafted in 2010 and published by the ABC in March 2015

indicate that well before the current funding cuts remote Indigenous communities had been scored and ranked, without consultation, against very narrow criteria. That document listed 192 communities including Tjuntjuntjara, Patjarr and Kiwirrkurra – well-known centres of artistic excellence – in 'Category C' as unviable; and Irrunytju (Wingellina) was listed as marginally more worthy of support in 'Category B'.³

Irrunytju is a small community with a population that fluctuates between 80 and 120 people. It grew at the site of an abandoned mining camp and was incorporated in 1976 with the support of government funds as a part of the Homeland Movement. It is located at the edge of the Gibson Desert near the tri-state border, within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Comprising of an area of approximately 188,000 sq. km., most of Ngaanyatjarra Lands were handed back to the original owners on 29 June 2005. It was the largest successful native title claim in Australian history.⁴ The Indigenous peoples in this part of the Australia have continuously occupied of their land for thousands of years and are the custodians of the world's oldest surviving cultures. On 29 April 2015, less than five years after that historic native title hand-back, the whole community of Irrunytju and people from nearby communities and outstations, came together to stage a protest march against the cuts and threatened closures that could force them off their own land.⁵

The contribution that Irrunytju has made to Australian art, culture and our national identity is phenomenal. Irrunytju artwork is held in almost every major private and public art collection in Australia. It has gained considerable international interest, including the high-profile 2006 commission at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and, as is well-documented, was celebrated and savaged during the boom and bust of the global art market almost a decade ago. This exhibition, which has been developed by the relatively new Minyma Kutjara Arts Project managed by Claire Wildish, reveals the resilience and commitment of the artists in this small remote community.

Kapi Ungkupayi is a contemporary tjukurpa. It recounts a true story about a journey made in January 2013 by the five senior Pitjantjatjara artists from Irrunytju and nearby

Papulangkutja. On a Friday morning at the height of Summer, Roma, Ivy, Jennifer, Tjawina and Mrs Woods drove out-bush to collect punu to carve artefacts. They drove along familiar tracks out past Karratha Creek towards Urunturu. The sky was clear azure blue and it was blisteringly hot.

The flat sandy country around Irrunytju is sparsely covered with spinifex and encircled by the low, worn-down Wingellina Hills and the Tomkinson Ranges. Driving through this country you are likely to pass a couple of camels sauntering along the track, a meandering dry creek bed edged with old river gums, a burnt out car, a lone eagle rising on hot thermals, and perhaps an emu or dingo.

After a while, Ivy's old Toyota overheated. They refilled the radiator using most of their water and as the engine spluttered they drove along slowly until it shuddered and stopped near a lone corkwood tree. They left the car to cool down and carrying axes and crowbars walked to the dry creek to dig up the punu. In the late afternoon they piled back into the car to go home, but it would not start. The Toyota had run out of fuel as well as water.

It was a very dangerous situation. The women were stranded in the desert with almost no food or water for five days. Mrs Woods, the eldest, was around eighty years old. She had been born c. 1935 at Kalaya Piti (Emu Water), a rockhole near Mimili and had spent her early years living a semi-nomadic way of life in the desert with her extended family. In order to stay alive they drew on experience gained when young and knowledge passed down through the generations in tjukurpa. They also found strength in their faith in God, a legacy from their contact with missionaries at Ernabella and Warburton. Like the Old Testament stories, tjukurpa are grand and poetic narratives that explain the cultural and symbolic significance of things. They integrate creation stories, social rules, ethical and spiritual values and schematically map desert tracks revealing the location of sacred sites, bush-foods, watercourses, rockholes and soaks.

Irrunytju and Urunturu are important places associated with the Minyma Kutjara tjukurpa. This tjukurpa tells how in the time of the dreaming two sisters were separated by

a willy-willy that blew the youngest girl far away. They were reunited when the elder sister was sent by her family on an epic quest journey to find her little sister and bring her home. As the two girls walked through the desert and learnt about their culture, social skills and how to survive they made many landmarks that are still visible today. The rock-hole at Irrunytju was created when the sisters were sitting indiscreetly opposite each other on two hills making hair-string skirts in preparation for women's business. When a stranger walked past and started laughing at them they flung their wana at her, hitting the ground so hard that the surface of the earth broke.

While the women were on familiar country inscribed by tjukurpa and shaped by tjuritja, they were acutely aware of their vulnerability. Using survival skills they set-up camp, rested in the shade of the tree beside the car during the hottest part of the day, and in the cool evenings made smooth depressions in the sand and lay under the stars, sharing blankets and keeping their dogs close to keep warm. They started a huge grass fire in a vain attempt to alert others to their position and cut the punu, the roots from the river gums, into short lengths and placed them into billy-cans so that the moisture would trickle out overnight. They chewed mingkulpa or sucked sugar to keep their mouths moist and scoured the land for almost imperceptible signs of food and water: tracks in the sand; bird-song; and variations in the vegetation that could indicate moist ground.

They caught ngintaka but could not find water. On the third day thirsty and worried Roma, Ivy and Jennifer walked several hours to Urunturu to find a waterhole where the minyma kutjara had stopped in the time of the dreaming, and that Tjawina remembered visiting as a child. They found it, but it was empty. Traditionally when walking in the desert anangu would retreat to the larger more reliable water sources during summer. Occasionally it was tense, they disagreed about what to do. Mrs Woods wanted to walk back to the community, but the others knew she was too frail. Sometimes they sang tjukurpa and on Sunday they sang hymns.

On the fourth day they were very thirsty and getting desperate. Leaving the others in the shade to look after Mrs

Woods, Jennifer and Ivy walked along the parched creek bed with renewed determination. A single cloud hovered in the blue sky above them as if a sign. A flock of desert finches descended noisily at a bend of the dry creek. Thousands of tiny birds with bright orange beaks settled on the sand and in the overhanging branches of the river gums. As she watched Roma remembered a tjukurpa songline that relayed how in severe droughts ngingi gathered in large numbers near tjunu 'holy water'. She rushed over, found a damp patch and called to the others. Using a stick and shovels the women began to dig. A camel stood nearby watching them. When it got dark they lit fires so that they did not have to stop digging until eventually, almost a metre down, they reached water.⁶

Everyone in the community was worried and had been out searching. The next day when the artists were found they did not want to leave – they had made tea and caught another ngintaka. Roma, Ivy, Jennifer, Tjawina and Mrs Woods recognised that the epic nature of their experience was like an ancient tjukurpa and when invited to exhibit in the Tarnanthi Festival they decided to share this story so that all Australians could understand the close and interconnected relationships between their culture and their country.

*We have an important story to tell. It is a new tjukurpa (dreaming story). It is a story about our culture, our faith and our relationship with our land. This is not a story that our grandmothers or grandfathers told us. This is our story – Kapi Ungkupayi. It happened to us.*⁷

– Roma Butler, Ivy Laidlaw, Jennifer Mitchell, Tjawina Roberts and Mrs Woods

This is our land. Always was and always will be.⁸

– Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis, Wingellina Protest, 29 April 2015



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Endnotes:

1. Chris Reid, Chair, Irrunytju Council, Wingellina Protest Speech, NgMedia, 29 April 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HibrXzaya, accessed 20 Sept 2015.
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4. National Native Title Tribunal, Ngaanyatjarra Lands (Part A) www.nntt.gov.au/SearchRegApps/Native-Claims/Pages/Determination_details.aspx?NNTT_FileNo=WCD2005/002.
5. Wingellina Protest, NgMedia, 29 April 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HibrXzaya24.
6. Roma Butler and Tjawina Roberts, unpublished artists' notes, 2015.
7. Roma Butler, Ivy Laidlaw, Jennifer Mitchell, Tjawina Roberts and Mrs Woods, unpublished artists' notes, 2015.
8. Elizabeth Marrkilyi Ellis, Wingellina Protest Speech, 29 April 2015.

Glossary

Kaurna:

tarnanthi – to bring forth, to renew, first light

Pitjantjatjara:

anangu – people

inma – ceremonial song and dance

kalaya – emu

kapi – water

kapi ungkupayi – he gave us water

mingkulpa – native tobacco

minyma kutjara – two women/sisters

minyma tjuta – many women

ngingi – finch

ngintaka – lizard

perentie – goanna

piti – water

punu – wood

tinka – lizard

tjukurpa – Dreaming story

tjuritja – beings of the dreaming

tjunu – holy water

wana – digging stick