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Knock 'em down rain

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The Warmun art movement
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Earlier this year, I was being shown around Darwin by Robert Mills, a Larrakia community leader, and I asked him about the weather. "Is it true that the wet is coming later? And that when it hits the rain is heavier?" Mills and I were spending the day together so he could give me a sense of what Darwin was like before white settlement. We'd never met before, so I figured the weather was a good conversation starter.

Mills sat in silence beside me. I barrelled on. "Do you think the climate is changing?" After a while Mills turned and looked at me. "My people don't really like to talk about the weather," he said.

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When I began my research for a book on Cyclone Tracy, I was taken aback to find that one of the most striking images of the cyclone was not a photo, but a painting, and one that had not been painted in Darwin, but a thousand kilometres south-west in the remote Kimberley community of Warmun.

In 1998, art agent Kevin Kelly and local Gija elder Queenie McKenzie, alongside other leading artists of the Warmun (Turkey Creek) community in Western Australia, established the Warmun Art Centre, with financial support from the nearby diamond mine. The original centre was set up in what Kelly describes as a "refurb of the old post office". Before that time, artists of the calibre of Rover Thomas sat outside the Warmun Roadhouse, playing cards, smoking and hoping for the occasional sale. The centre gave them a chance to focus their artistic practice, and to reap some economic benefits. It quickly became the pride of the community.

When singer–songwriter Paul Kelly (no relation) drove through Gija country from Kununurra to Warmun in 2007, he saw what he'd thought of as the abstractions of the work of McKenzie, Thomas and other local artists come to life around him. "The shapes and colours in their work correspond to the landscapes we're travelling through – scattered reddish ranges, small clumps of rounded hills, pinkish earth, purple shadows," he wrote, arriving three weeks before the newly developed Warmun Art Centre was officially opened. "A large boab tree stands sentinel before it. It's an airy, light-filled structure of wood and corrugated iron."

In July 2010, it rained 67 millimetres in a single day at Fitzroy Crossing and, locals told me, closer to 100 millimetres in other areas of the Kimberley. It typically doesn't rain a drop in July. Artist Claude Carter, who is based at Fitzroy Crossing, told Kevin Kelly that the rain coincided with the return of cultural material to the Kimberley which had been held in an overseas museum, including skeletal remains. Six months later, Carter's sister, who lived near Turkey Creek, 450 kilometres north-east of Fitzroy Crossing, dreamt that something was amiss. Other elders also reported prophetic dreams.

On Sunday 13 March 2011, after days of heavy rainfall caused by a cyclonic depression, floodwaters began swelling Turkey Creek. Gary Fletcher, who worked at the art centre, watched the waters rise from the old house he shared with his wife Maggie, the centre's manager. Their house sat on relatively high ground. As it became clear things were going to get worse, the Fletchers rushed to the centre to move as many paintings as they could – mainly significant works from the community's private collection – onto high shelves and tables.

But in the space of a few short hours that afternoon, Turkey Creek rose beyond measure. At the same time, a torrent of water sweeping across the red plains engulfed the remote community, washing away walls and taking a thousand paintings – close to 90% of the gallery's public collection – with it. Fletcher waded through floodwaters to save what he could but was soon trapped by dangerous currents. For a brief, distressing period, his wife thought he'd drowned.

As Nicholas Rothwell reported in the *Australian*, "It was devastation: houses were wrecked, trailers and demountables were smashed and turned upside down, refrigerators lodged high in the branches of trees." One resident, Dallas Purdie, told the ABC, "This is the first time in history it's come up this high. The whole community is wrecked." Artworks lost included pieces by Betty Carrington, Patrick Mung Mung, Shirley Purdie and Hector Jandany. Another local, Leanne Mosquito, said the loss was all the more devastating because it meant a loss of knowledge: "People paint about their country. They talk about country through painting."

The Fletchers had managed to save 300 or so works of the Warmun heritage collection. With the help of Rio Tinto, the present owners of the Argyle Diamond Mine, these were initially taken to Kununurra. There they were examined by Marcelle Scott, a senior conservator from the University of Melbourne, and a PhD student, Lyndon Ormond-Parker.

"When I first saw them, well, they were wet. And muddy," Scott tells me. "A couple of the paintings really looked like lamingtons, covered in mud and twigs and leaves."

Many of the works were on materials that were particularly vulnerable to water, such as chipboard and plywood. Some works were left to dry slowly and naturally in Kununurra but around 170 damaged pieces were driven to Melbourne in the back of a freezer truck.

Five of Warmun's elders visited the University of Melbourne in October to give Scott information about the paintings that would help ensure their conservation. Natural materials, without the use of a lot of binder, can be unstable and one of the things that distinguishes the paintings of the Warmun community is the use of ochre – the wonderfully resonant yellows, pinks, browns of their country. Painting country connects people with their land but the ochre also literally returns them to country: digging for it provides people with a purpose to seek permission from pastoral owners to revisit their birthplaces. As the elders worked with the conservators, they sang some of the songs associated with the works.

Scott attests that the restoration has gone "phenomenally well". The process of saving the paintings pushed "to the frontiers of what people have done before in terms of flood-damaged artworks and conservation", although money is still being sought to allow some of the finer conservation work to be completed.

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The Warmun art movement was, in fact, created by extreme weather. On Christmas day, 1974, Cyclone Tracy laid waste to the city of Darwin and caused flooding across northern Australia. The following year, Rover Thomas, then a stockman, had a visitation from a Gija woman he called his aunt, who had died as a result of injuries sustained when her car crashed in a ditch on a flooded Kimberley road in the rains that followed Tracy. She was alive when she was picked up by a medical plane but died in the air above Broome.

In Thomas' vision, the woman's spirit travelled with him across the Kimberley and five different language groups. Finally, she showed him the Rainbow Serpent destroying Darwin. Thomas was known for his extraordinary visions but, to quote Wally Caruana, the former curator of indigenous art at the National Gallery of Australia, it was the number of language groups this dreaming encountered, the breadth of the country it 'sang', that "really knocked people out".

The auntie's spirit showed Thomas aspects of country and taught him the Gija names for things. She taught him a song and a dance for this journey and showed him designs to paint on boards to be carried on the shoulders of men as they performed. This vision became the basis for the Gurirr Gurirr ceremony, which is still performed today. The Gurirr Gurirr, according to writer Alexis Wright:

demonstrates the continuing way Indigenous people have retained knowledge through a cultural sense of what the great ancestors in the environment are telling us. This is how the stories tie us to the land as guardians and caretakers, and the land to us as the most powerful source of law.

Cyclone Tracy, like the Warmun flood, was interpreted as a warning to Aboriginal people to reinvigorate their cultural practices. It was believed to have targeted Darwin as the centre of European culture. The first Gurirr Gurirr storyboards were painted by Paddy Jaminji, a senior artist related to the woman whose spirit had visited Thomas. (Some of these boards were among the works rescued last year from the Warmun floodwaters.) Thomas, who was born on the other side of the Great Sandy Desert almost a thousand kilometres away, needed Jaminji's skills, as well as his relationship to the woman and her country, to provide the appropriate knowledge to create the song cycle. Warmun was not his place.

It has been argued that one of Thomas' motivations in creating the Gurirr Gurirr was his desire for connection to his new home: painting and singing his way into the relationship. Certainly all Thomas' work, including the Gurirr Gurirr paintings, are an expression of the social and cultural dislocation that has defined indigenous experience last century and this. In one of the Gurirr Gurirr paintings the woman passes over Mount Cockburn and, according to the words of the song that accompany the painting, she cries out, "I'm leaving my country."

There are echoes of this in Maggie Fletcher's description of the experiences of the 300 people evacuated from Warmun after the flood:

This was a traumatic time … In a state of shock, lobbed together in a workers' 'village' in Kununurra, the community members suddenly found themselves homeless evacuees in a foreign land. It was two weeks later that one of the most senior artists managed to ask, "Where are we?" … What this man meant was: 'Whose country are we on? This is not our country – we shouldn't be here without their permission.'

Thomas' work is a way of storytelling that incorporates contemporary events into the narrative of the Dreaming, which envelops knowledge, history, culture and law. He believed it was important the Gurirr Gurirr ceremony be performed for Europeans – and so it has been. His chronicling of contemporary events for both black and white audiences continued after the Gurirr Gurirr series. It includes works on the Ruby Plains and Texas Downs massacres, as well as his depiction of the impact on the landscape of the damming of the Ord River to form Lake Argyle, the largest artificial lake in Australia, in 1971.

In 1991, a decade after the Gurirr Gurirr works, Thomas painted the iconic *Cyclone Tracy*, in which a black gulf sweeps across the canvas eradicating everything in its path. In painting the recent history of northern Australia in such an ambitious fashion, Thomas started a movement.

As Paul Kelly puts it in his song, 'The Ballad of Queenie and Rover', about the lifelong friendship of Queenie McKenzie and Rover Thomas:

She said, "I want to paint." He said, "I'll teach ya."

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Last July I visited Kununurra, a pretty but troubled town where the streets are lined with boab trees, to speak to Kevin Kelly, now the curator of the town's Red Rock Art Gallery and the manager of Rover Thomas' estate. The storyboards on display in his gallery, once held above dancers' heads while they performed corroboree, told a direct and affecting story. I sat down among them, while outside a van spray-painted in homage to AC/DC drove past. The first set of Gurirr Gurirr boards I looked at were painted by Tiger Moore, who briefly inherited the Gurirr Gurirr cycle. (These days the right to the knowledge of the ceremony resides with Jane Tinmarie-Yalunga, Thomas' daughter.) Painted in the mid '90s, Moore's storyboards are more cartoonish and colourful than those of Jaminji and Thomas. I also watched a video of a performance of the Gurirr Gurirr led by Moore in 1996 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

The board representing Cyclone Tracy depicts the Rainbow Serpent for the Kimberley area, Wungul (also spelt 'Wungurr'). In Moore's words: "This is the same snake that killed mother [the old woman] and caused Tracy. That's the song of that snake there now." Wungul is also the name of the cyclone. A series of boards follows. There is one of the truck that the snake grabbed and pulled down the embankment – the accident that ended up killing the woman. There is an alternative version of the accident with the truck and the doctor's plane that picks her up. In another board the woman passes over the land associated with the Bat Dreaming, in which the bat tells the kangaroo to go and live at Warmun. Another is an image of a *barnkal*, a flying fox looking for somewhere to stop. There is the dance of the 'Devil Devil', the Joowarri. At Tablelands in the Northern Territory, a place represented in part by the distinctive silhouette of boab trees, the woman says, "This is my country now."

Seven months later, I got the opportunity to see a set of boards by Paddy Jaminji and Rover Thomas. I was a long way from the eastern Kimberley, in a massive temperature-controlled warehouse in an unmarked location in Canberra, home to the NGA archives. I'd been taken there by Wally Caruana. "Rover's work is not flat," he said, pointing at one of dozens of works in the hour we have. "It pushes and pulls. There's an incredible sensitivity to the materials. He uses the earth to paint the earth." The ochres had an almost shimmering intensity, which brought to mind the story of Thomas seeing a Mark Rothko painting in the NGA and saying, "Who's that bugger who paints like me?"

One painting had been finished with sugar mixed into the ochre, which meant that cockroaches had eaten the surface of the work before it was archived. On others were the indentations of paw prints, where Thomas' dog had run across the canvas.

That same afternoon we visited the archives of the National Museum of Australia to see a set of storyboards that had been used in performances of the Gurirr Gurirr during the mid '80s. Unlike the images I'd seen in the morning, these were on masonite so that dancers could create a wobbleboard effect when holding them aloft. The images were slightly sketchier, having been painted in the knowledge that they would be supplemented by the performance of the ceremony itself, and scuffed with use and wear. As with all the Gurirr Gurirr images, animals were also places, weather and events. A serpent was a cyclone. A crocodile was a mountain. A person was a kangaroo. Time operated differently.

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The source of the water that devastated Warmun was the subject of much discussion in the weeks after the flooding in March 2011. The insurance company initially attributed the damage to the rise of Turkey Creek, which meant no payout. As part of the process of showing that the water had also washed down directly from the plains, Maggie Fletcher took the question to the people, who had mostly been evacuated to Kununurra. "We had lots of conversations about the flood and where the water had come from," says Fletcher. Some elders regarded the flood as a warning against the breakdown of cultural practice in the community. "This got people thinking and talking and after a while, people started to make paintings about the flood … These flood paintings are history in the making."

With disaster can come revival. Mary Thomas, painter and Gija elder, has pinned her hopes on it: "The floodwater came and washed all those bad things, you know, problems we had." Floods and cyclones are a reminder to stay connected to country, kin and spirit. Perhaps that helps explain why Robert Mills, the Larrakia man I met in Darwin, didn't feel the weather was a topic for casual conservation. It also explains something he said to me later. "Your people think of cyclones as bad things," Mills told me. "But we don't see it that way."

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