Knock 'em down rain

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The Warmun art movement

Sophie Cunningham

*Early this year, I was being shown around 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 Darren was like before white settlement. It wouldn’t be met before, so I figured the weather was a good conversation starter.

Mills sat in silence beside me. I barracked 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.

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 “shambles 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 Gipuz County from Kununurra to Warmun in 2003, he saw what he had 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 rockridges, small mounds 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, tangle-thickened structure of wood and corrugated iron.

In July 2010, I ran 67 millimetres in a single day at Flinders Crossing and, locally, residents close to 100 millimetres in other areas of the Kimberley. It typically doesn’t rain so much in July. Astral Claudie Carter, who is based at Flinders Crossing, told Kevin Kelly that the rain connected with the resettlement of Aboriginal people to the Kimberley which had been held in an overseas museum, including skeletal remains. Six months later, Carter’s sister, who lives near Turkey Creek, 400 kilometres north-east of Flinders Crossing, dreamt that something was amiss. Older elders also reported prophetic dreams.

In Sunday 13 March 2011, after days of heavy rain caused by a cyclonic depression, floodwaters began seeking Turkey Creek. Gary Fletcher, who worked at the art centre, watched the waters rise from the old house he shared with his Maggie, the centre’s lawyer. 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 washed through floodwaters to save what he could but was soon trapped by dangerous currents. For a brief, depressing period, his wife thought he’d drowned.

As Nicholas Rothfeld reported in The Australian, “It was a devastation: houses were wrecked, trailers and dammlettes were wrecked and turned upside down, refrigerators lodged high in the branches of trees.’’ One resident, Daniel Pune, told the ABC, “This is the first time in history it’s come up this high. The whole community is affected.” Arnhem Land lost iconic places by Betty Carrington, Patrick Mung Mung, Shirley Purdie and Hector Jandany. Another local, Leanne Misquart, 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 Río Tinto, the present owners of the Anglo 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, Lynnden Gmond-Parker.

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

The Warmun art movement was, in fact, created by extreme weather. On Christmas day, 1974, Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin, a disaster that would come to define the city. In the wake of the cyclone, the Fletchers moved to Warmun, where they set up the Warmun Art Centre.

“Cyclone Tracy left Darwin in tears,” Ninti Williams, a Warmun artist, said to me. “It was the greatest disaster to ever hit Darwin. And after that, the Warmun Art Centre played a significant role in the recovery.”

The Warmun art centre was named after a Gija woman who had died as a result of Cyclone Tracy. The Warmun Art Centre was established to give expression to this story, to give voice to those who had been affected by the tragedy.

In the months that followed, the Warmun Art Centre was transformed. It became a centre for the production of artworks, a place where people could come together and create. It soon became a hub of activity, a place where people could share stories, knowledge and experiences.

In 1983, art work by the Warmun Art Centre was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The exhibition was titled the Warmun Art Centre: The Frontiers of What People Have Done Before. The exhibition was a landmark event in the history of Indigenous art in Australia.

In 1991, the art centre was renamed the Warmun Art Centre. The name change was symbolic, representing a new chapter in the history of the centre. The centre continued to thrive, with artists producing works that would go on to be exhibited around the world.

In 2011, the art centre was rebranded as the Warmun Art Centre. The name change was reflective of the centre’s new direction, its focus on the production of works that would be exhibited in the International Art Centre.

The centre has continued to thrive, with artists producing works that would go on to be exhibited around the world. The centre has also continued to grow, with the addition of new artists and the introduction of new technologies.

The centre is now home to one of the most successful Indigenous art movements in the world. The Warmun Art Centre is home to some of the most talented Indigenous artists in the world, and their works are sought after by collectors and galleries around the world.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Gallery, which is the largest Indigenous art gallery in the world. The gallery is home to a collection of over 1,000 works, and it is open to the public.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Workshops, which are a place where artists can come together and create. The workshops are open to the public, and they offer a range of workshops and classes for people of all ages and abilities.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Store, which is a place where people can come to buy works of art. The store is open to the public, and it sells a range of works, including paintings, prints, and sculptures.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Office, which is a place where the centre’s staff can work. The office is open to the public, and it is where you can come to find out more about the centre and to see the works of art.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Board, which is a group of people who help to govern the centre. The board is open to the public, and it is where you can come to find out more about the centre and to see the works of art.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Events, which are a series of events that are held in the centre. The events are open to the public, and they offer a range of workshops and classes for people of all ages and abilities.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Resources, which are a collection of resources that are available for people to use. The resources are open to the public, and they include a range of books, videos, and websites.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Library, which is a place where people can come to read. The library is open to the public, and it is where you can come to find out more about the centre and to see the works of art.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Studio, which is a place where artists can come together and create. The studio is open to the public, and it is where you can come to see the artists at work.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Museum, which is a place where people can come to learn about the history of the centre. The museum is open to the public, and it is where you can come to find out more about the centre and to see the works of art.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Education, which is a group of people who help to teach. The education is open to the public, and it is where you can come to find out more about the centre and to see the works of art.

The centre is also home to the Warmun Art Centre Projects, which are a series of projects that are led by the centre. The projects are open to the public, and they offer a range of workshops and classes for people of all ages and abilities.

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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.

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 conversation. 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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