Desert Mob 2012
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Director’s Foreword

The Araluen Arts Centre is once again proud to host and present the annual Desert Mob exhibition, now in its twenty second year, in the region where Australia’s contemporary Aboriginal art movement began some 40 years ago.

Desert Mob is an affirmation of culture and country, bringing together people and stories from the vast inland region of Central Australia, inclusive of the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia; the countries of the Arrernte, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara, Puntupi, Yankunytjara, Ngaanyatjarra, Martu, Walmajarri, Kukatja, Warlpiri, Walmanpa, Waramungu, Alywarr, Anmatyerr, Pintupi-Luritja and Kaytetye peoples.

The energy of the Desert Mob exhibition is always radiant, with new and innovative works revealed to the viewers every year; with new and emerging artists exhibiting their work alongside long time exhibitors and established artists; and with new art forms being developed and displayed. As always, artists from Central Australian Aboriginal art centres have travelled widely this year, attending exhibitions and events around the globe, acting as great ambassadors for Central Australia and Australia as a whole.

The audiences for Desert Mob continue to grow year after year, reflecting the continued popularity of the event and its stature within the national and international Aboriginal art events calendar. The ongoing success of the Desert Mob exhibition is testament to the incredible talent and creative ingenuity of the artists it represents.

The addition of the Desert Mob Symposium and the Desert Mob MarketPlace has greatly added to the value of the Desert Mob Exhibition, which has only been possible due to our strong, ongoing relationship with Desart. These events continue to grow and develop in their own way, with Desert Mob visitors now able to hear current stories about artists and art centres at the Symposium and then meet and buy works directly from the artists when they visit MarketPlace.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Arrernte Custodians, on whose land Desert Mob takes place, as well as the ongoing commitment of the Araluen Arts Centre staff, the staff at Desart, the Desart Executive Committee, and the executive committees, staff and artists from all the Desart member art centres for their ongoing commitment to the annual Desert Mob event. I would also like to thank Margo Neale for her support of the event and for writing an essay for this year’s exhibition catalogue.

The beautiful country and landscapes of Central Australia are at the heart of the Desert Mob experience, serving as both inspiration for the works in the exhibition and the backdrop for the overall event. Seeing the works in their country of origin is a unique opportunity; one that I hope visitors will appreciate so much that they continue to return year after year, to watch the story of this incredible contemporary art movement continue to unfold before our eyes.

Tim Rollason
Director
Araluen Cultural Precinct
Message from Desart

Once again Desert Mob tantalises us with aesthetically beautiful, diverse and articulate expressions of Central Australian Aboriginal cultures. Since first presented in 1991, Desert Mob has evolved into one of Australia’s major arts events. It is the portal through which enthusiasts of Aboriginal arts can experience the exhibiting artists’ cultures and talents.

The Desert Mob Exhibition and Symposium provide us with the opportunity to share the inspirations, realisations and ongoing innovations in technique and use of materials which together radiate vibrant expressions of culture and place.

The 22nd Desert Mob builds on the tradition of previous exhibitions and, as in the past, the 2012 exhibition strongly and proudly asserts the core strength of our living cultures. As each year passes, the importance of Desert Mob as a record of arts development in the region increases. The 2012 Desert Mob continues to affirm the vitality of the regions’ artistic expressions and in doing so reinforces the ongoing leadership and reputation of Central Australian Aboriginal arts in further cementing the essence of desert cultures in our national identity.

The role of the Art Centres in supporting the artistic expressions of the communities in which they are located cannot be understated. The works showcased in the exhibition result from the significant support and investment afforded the artists and their creative communities over many years. The Art Centres are Aboriginal-owned businesses that steward the artistic and cultural priorities of community members as well as being critical spaces for asserting self-determined identity, the sharing of culture between young and old and a source through which economic independence can be secured.

In 2012, Desart, with the support of Araluen Arts Centre, presents the inaugural Desart Artworker Photography Prize as an adjunct to the Desert Mob Exhibition and Symposium. This innovative prize has been developed to nurture the photographic skills of Artworkers from community Art Centres and in doing so introduces a new medium through which Artworkers and artists can express their world as seen through their eyes.

I acknowledge the ongoing support of the Araluen Arts Centre and recognise the important partnership developed over many years between Araluen, Desart and the exhibiting Aboriginal Art Centres in providing this important platform for the artists to present their work and share their stories.

Philip Watkins
Executive Officer
Desart
Kukula McDonald
Red tailed black cockatoos, 2012
acrylic on plywood (birdhouse), 20 x 16 x 17 cm
Mwerre Anthurre Artists, Alice Springs, NT
Marlene Rubuntja and Sally Rubuntja
One more woman, 2012
limited edition multi-plate etching, 58 x 39 cm
Yarrenyty Arltere Artists, Alice Springs, NT
Kevin Dixon
Camp dog #1, 2012
found objects and screws, 60 x 42 x 115 cm
Greenbush Art Group, Alice Springs, NT
Sheena Dodd
Papa kala tjara kutjara, 2012
tjanpi (desert grass), wool and raffia, 35 x 22 x 80 cm / 40 x 25 x 72 cm
Tjanpi Desert Weavers, Alice Springs, NT
Grace Robinya
Easter Carnival football match, 2012
acrylic on linen, 120 x 90 cm
Tangentyere Artists, Alice Springs, NT
Rona Penangka Rubuntja
Ntaria versus Areyonga - the mark, 2012
terracotta clay and underglazes, 69 x 43 cm
Hermannsburg Potters, Hermannsburg, NT
Daisy Moss
My mother's country, 2011
acrylic on linen, 107 x 122 cm
Artists of Ampilatwatja, Ampilatwatja, NT
Marie Shilling
Kulgura Roadhouse, 2011
acrylic on canvas, 76 x 122 cm
Tapatjatjaka Art and Craft Centre, Titjikala, NT
Evelyn Young
Untitled, 2012
acrylic on molded plastic bust, 53 x 26 x 30 cm
Keringke Arts, Santa Teresa, NT
May Wilson
Seed story, 2012
acrylic on linen, 76.5 x 60.5 cm
Arlpwe Art and Culture Centre, Arlpwe, NT
Nybyert Tjapangati

Untitled, 2012
acrylic on linen, 91 x 61 cm
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, NT
Beyula Puntungka Napangka
Kalinykalinya tjukurrpa, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 152 x 91 cm
Papunya Tjupi Arts, Papunya, NT
Rosie Tasman Napurrurla
Seed Dreaming, 2011
acrylic on linen, 120.5 x 60 cm
Warnayaka Art, Lajamanu, NT
Felicity Nampijinpa Robinson
Ngapa Tjukurpa (Water Dreaming), 2012
acrylic on linen, 107 x 61cm
Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu, NT
Annie Morrison
Bush passionfruit, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 100 x 102 cm
Julalikari Arts, Tennant Creek, NT
Kaye Pweri Beasley
Six bendy flowers, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 75 x 112 cm
Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Culture Centre, Tennant Creek, NT
Imandra Richards

Inma, 2012
acrylic on canvas board, 50 cm diameter
Walkatjara Art, Uluru, NT
Niningka Lewis
Kettle, 2012
Acrylic on River Red Gum (Itara), 24 x 12 x 32 cm
Maruku Arts, Uluru, NT
Monica Punjiina Watson
Pukara, 2012
acrylic on linen, 153 x 183 cm
Ninuku Arts, Kalka, SA
Dickie Mikyintjirri
Watiku inma Tjukurpa, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 112 x 182 cm
Ernabella Arts, Ernabella, SA
Puna Yanima
Antara, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm
Mimili Maku Arts, Mimili, SA
Ruby Williamson & Wawirryya Burton
Kalinjikalinypa, 2012
acrylic on linen, 196.5 x 196.5 cm
Tjala Arts, Amata, SA
Taylor Cooper
Malara, wanampi tjukurpa, 2012
acrylic on linen, 153 x 101.5 cm
Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts, Fregon, SA
Maringka Baker
Minyma kutjara tjukurpa, 2012
acrylic on linen, 200 x 120 cm
Tjungu Palya, Nyapari, SA
Whiskey Tjukangku
Arrernte country, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 121 x 76 cm
Iwantja Arts and Crafts, Indulkana, SA
Nora Wompi
Kunawarritji, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm
Warlayirti Artists, Balgo, WA
Mary Gibson
Karku, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 134 x 138 cm
Tjarilri Artists, Tjukurla, WA
Tjunka Lewis
Tawal, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 101.5 cm
Warakurna Artists, Warakurna, WA
Lloyd Jackson
Kurr kurta and talipanta, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 153 x 76 cm
Papulankutja Artists, Blackstone, WA
Ngipi Ward

Untitled

limited edition print on paper, 61 x 44 cm

Kayili Artists, Patjarr, WA
Elton Wirrt

Petermann Ranges, 2012
watercolour on paper, 12 x 36 cm
Ngurratjuta Ilji Ntjarra Art Centre, Alice Springs, NT
Pinnyrr (Nancy) Patterson
Yulpu, 2012
acrylic on linen, 300 x 125 cm
Martumili Artists, Newman, WA
Pinyirr (Nancy) Patterson and her daughter Betty Whyoulter in front of Nancy’s artwork, Yulpu (300 x 125cm acrylic on linen, detail), Newman, 2012
Photo Gabrielle Sullivan, courtesy Martumili Artists

Warakurna Artists Tjilji Arts and Crafts holiday program, Warakurna, 2012
Photo Alexandra Frith, courtesy Warakurna Artists
Art Centres are our stories

Art centres are the good news story of the desert. In fact, they are a vital good news story according to speakers at the Indigenous Art Centres: Hubs for Innovation panel discussion in Canberra last year.

I have heard art centres described in these positive terms for a couple of years now, and it gains a certain poignancy when pitted against numerous reports and media coverage of doom, gloom and despair in the desert, where any glimmer of hope attracts a dose of sudden extinguishment. This is not to say things are not tough, which is an understatement, but it is equally obvious that for many, art centres ‘rock’, and like beacons in the desert, they illuminate cultural, economic and social pathways. They are generative centres for health and well-being and to varying degrees provide de facto services in health, education, family counselling, refuge and even banking. They are community hubs supporting family and culture - places where people feel safe.

As Jane Young, chairperson of Desart, says, “Art centres were not set up by white people. Art centres belong to us, places to paint, to talk stories, to come together. Happy places for everyone. No violence… can talk about problems, get 50 – 60% of art sales to artists”. She also proudly adds that some art centres are more than 60 years old. This sense of ownership is embodied in the title Desert Mob, a title in use since 1999. The title captures the essence of what Vivien Johnson referred to in last year’s catalogue as the “exhibitions collectivist curatorial project” which I will talk more about later.

What a long way things have come in a relatively short time. The expression “the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there” comes to mind when I recall my first forays into the desert as a young student in the late 1960s. Even in the early 1970s when I lived in Arnhem Land and made my annual pilgrimage home to Victoria via Alice on the old Ghan, one did not hear talk of art centres, apart from some activity at Ernabella and Hermannsburg. A new-order interface with the outside world through art and culture developed with the establishment of Papunya Tula Artists in 1972, followed by women’s centres and literacy centres during the eighties, which evolved into art and culture centres in the mid to late 1990s. By the noughties the mould was cast. In 2000, there were less than 20 art centres who were Desart members. Now there are around 50 centres comprising some 3000 artists. There are another 50 centres supported by related peak organisations such as Ananguku Arts and the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (ANKAAA) and the more recently emerged Art Centre Hub WA (ACHWA) and Indigenous Art Centre Alliance (IACA). The proliferation of art centres has waxed and waned according to factors as varied as government funding rounds, the availability of strong, flexible and ongoing art advisors, regional movements of artists and their changing interests, and economic viability.

Art centres are powerhouses in their own right, let alone when they coalesce in great profusion at Desert Mob. I have to admit I was a Telstra awards tragic for years and did not recognise the dynamism of Desert Mob until a few years ago. Now I am hooked. Unfortunately I had to forego the honour of being a judge on the Telstra art award this year to focus on work in the desert. If word-of-mouth is the most effective form of advertising then there should be a tsunami on its way. I have
Dr George Lewkovitz and Kevin Namatjira, Alice Springs, 2012
Photo Iris Bendor, courtesy Ngurratjuta Iluja Njjarra Art Centre

Ruby Williamson and Wawiriya Burton painting collaboratively, Amata, 2012
Photo Skye O’Meara, courtesy Tjala Arts
never experienced anything like it: the throb; the flesh-pressing at the market day; the unbelievable bargains sold directly by
the art centres in their annual stock room spring clean; and the queuing and jostling for when the doors are flung open and
a human wave surges into the gallery. Fevered emotions deliciously subvert the usually cool and mannered style of urban
galleries. Pastiched into this tableau are Indigenous and non-Indigenous buyers rushing about, confetti-ing the walls with
red dots, sometimes their enthusiasm outstripping the capacity of their wallets. There is nothing quite like Desert Mob Art,
let alone the Desert Mob weekend, and ‘mob’ is an apt descriptor for the milling and mobbing that defines the weekend and
the overwhelming number of desert people visible. There is no doubt who owns this event.

Uniquely the works are not selected by Araluen Arts Centre, the exhibiting gallery, but by the artists through the art centres,
each of which is invited to submit ten works. Like a snapshot of the year just gone, each art centre effectively curates the
profile they wish to project of the community for which they work. With between 30 and 35 participating centres and around
300 works, it is an eye-popping curatorial feat.

The curatorial baton then passes from the art centres to the curator, Stephen Williamson, of Araluen Arts Centre, who
choreographs the work intelligently, strategically and coherently. He retains its integrity without losing the raw energy of the
desert. Each community with its semi-cubicled patch of real estate in the galleries (and each metre is prime) sets up visual
dialogues between works both within and between the spaces. What one sees is a kind of genetic mapping of influence
and innovation, bred of kinship and proximity, coursing through the visual arteries of the exhibition and resonating with the
bloodlines of the artists across time, generations, gender and media. Only here at Desert Mob can the dynamics of this
cultural mapping be seen, like a genetic prism for those with the eyes and mind to see and know.

Philip Watkins, CEO of Desart, noted that art centres are “…places of innovation and bridges for reciprocal engagement
with the wider world”. They are places for collaboration between different language groups as well as with artists further
afIELD in cross-cultural partnerships, which I prefer to call inter-cultural relations. It is these collaborations with the wider
world that ultimately show Anangu confidence, strength and agency. ‘Communities working with art advisors’ is the primary
inter-cultural collaboration, with each supporting the other in various ways to assist in the facilitation of art and other
collaborations in the market place further afield.

Over the decades, we as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, have asserted our rights and our place in contemporary
Australian society in many ways, but none as powerfully as in the arts. With it, concepts such as Indigenous agency have
evolved and desert artists have independently, and through their art centres, instituted it.

Desert artists today are strong and savvy. They know what they want and how and where to get it - whether it be new
materials and technologies, or access to the skills of non-Indigenous artists with whom they choose to collaborate on their
own terms. As a senior custodian Frank Young said at the Desert Mob Symposium last year. “We choose what we share.
By sharing, we’re not giving it away, it is always inside us, in every Anangu – this is just the way we are”. In the case of
the Anangu Songlines project Alive with the Dreaming: Songlines of the Western Desert, it took Anangu nearly a decade
to succeed in accessing the human and financial resources necessary to undertake their ambitious project of tracking
particular songlines across three states. X

Together, artists know how to protect their rights and to direct and manage others to work with them in varying roles.
Ironically, Indigenous agency can be most at risk when others, with the best of intentions, diminish the very agency of
the Aboriginal artists they are trying to protect. After all, having agency is the capacity to act on your own behalf, so for
someone else to act on your behalf is to reduce that agency. Protecting Indigenous agency and ‘the right to speak’ was
firmly at the helm according to Desart when they responded to concerns about some high profile collaborations this year.
At a special executive meeting in May, they reinforced that “…the decision to participate (in collaborative projects) … is to
be determined by relevant art centre boards and/or the artists”, that is by the relevant Aboriginal people and not by others.
The protocol of ‘not speaking for others’, fundamental to Aboriginal cultural practice and thus respecting the right to speak
has been on the agenda of more than one Desart board meeting.

There are many committed souls, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with long years of experience and dedication to desert


Ginger and Iyawi Wikilyiri paint their first collaborative canvas, Nyapari, 2012
Photo Joanna Byrne, courtesy Tjungu Palya

Elias Walker & Anwar Young, Amata, 2012
Photo Rhonda (Unurupa) Dick, courtesy Tjala Arts

Marcellius Riley and Arnold Brumby
Participants in Hector Burton’s Young Fellas program, Amata, 2012.
Photo Rhonda (Unurupa) Dick, courtesy Tjala Arts

Elias Walker & Anwar Young, Amata, 2012
Photo Rhonda (Unurupa) Dick, courtesy Tjala Arts

Linda Syddick Napaltjarri and Samantha Daniels, Alice Springs, 2012
Photo courtesy Ngurratjuta Ilitja Ntjarra Art Centre

Linda Syddick Napaltjarri and Samantha Daniels, Alice Springs, 2012
Photo courtesy Ngurratjuta Ilitja Ntjarra Art Centre

Ginger and Iyawi Wikilyiri paint their first collaborative canvas, Nyapari, 2012
Photo Joanna Byrne, courtesy Tjungu Palya
artists who have varying and shifting views on the pathway ahead, profoundly so in some cases. At one extreme is the attitude that Aboriginal culture should die with the older generations, that the abyss looms and there is no saving it. At the other end, is the view that it is a dynamic culture which evolves to survive as it has always done and disruptions are not necessarily a threat to continuity, although in an altered form. Also in the mix are those who believe the culture should be preserved in aspic, collected before it disappears, a contemporary version of the ‘salvage mentality’ which can be seen in many existing frozen-in-time collections. Yet others say that Aboriginal people are no longer capable of protecting their own culture, and sell it out to commercial and academic interests. Some see themselves as ‘protectors’ of Aboriginal artists, guardians of their culture and their knowledge as well as of their health and well-being. In contemporary parlance, they are advocates and mentors who guide their artists through the dark forests of the outside world, protecting them from would-be exploiters. Emily Kame Kngwarreye from Utopia, where there was no art centre, did not see herself as exploitable, she developed her own strategies, including ‘painting rubbish paintings for rubbish people’, as she used to say, or just ‘going bush’. Then there are those who see their role more as facilitators and less as ‘parents’ or protectors, who respond to opportunities not only of their own making. They see that the artists, who are their employers, know best. They see the artist’s independence and interests protected within the systems and structures of the very art centres they own.

At the end of the day and despite the validity of these diverse voices, the voices that matter most in regard to culture are those whose culture, country and stories are being spoken about. Proper adherence to respect and ‘not speaking for others’ prevails. A lament heard across the Lands these days, and indeed across Aboriginal Australia, is the lack of uptake of culture by the young. As Daisy Ward from Warakurna says “…our young fellas are only interested in rap, and hip hop and smart phones right now … not interested in hanging out with the Elders … so we gotta put our stories away now for later”. Tapaya Edwards, a committed young man who works regionally with youth and culture, voiced similar observations and made a heartfelt statement, almost a plea, at a gathering of Elders and partners for the Songlines project which is one such reciprocal collaboration that stimulates cross-generational knowledge transfer. As we all know, youths from cultures everywhere are distracted like this and come back to matters of culture, later, but unfortunately the senior custodians are worrying that later might be too late. The living libraries will be gone. Thus the importance and power of a digital knowledge archive such as Ara Irititja.vii

For similar reasons of cultural continuity, senior artist Hector Burton, together with colleague Frank Young, has found new ways of engaging the youth at Amata. They are leading the way in not only getting young men involved with Tjala Arts to paint the stories, but are also breaking new ground by curating exhibitions themselves. Punu-Nguru (From the Trees), shown at RAFT Gallery in Alice Springs, was described by Nicolas Rothwell as a “…group exhibition designed round bush painting workshops for the community’s younger generation.” viii This increasing movement of men back into the art centres has been noted by various art advisors. Other initiatives of self-reliance include the Mutuka project, an arts-in-health study and an Anangu heritage collection, all of which are associated with the efforts of the Palya fund.ix

Another shift of note this year is the push by art centres into Asia. The Warburton community collection successfully toured to seven venues in Shanghai and Beijing, to be followed with a further eight museums in western China. Others include sell-out exhibitions from Ernabella Arts and Ninuku Arts in Singapore and a significant exhibition, beyond Asia, by Ninuku Arts in Soho, New York. While some art centres are building on their strengths in the Australian market with great entrepreneurship, others are exploring new markets further afield in response to the local ‘fenced -in market’ as one art advisor described it.

Whether we call it collaboration, reciprocal engagement or just working together, the way of the future lies in this fertile zone. As Victorian-based Indigenous film maker Wayne Blair said in relation to the success of the recent film ‘The Sapphires’ “Blackfellas and whitefellas made this film together … it is a bit of a metaphor for what this country can do (working together)”.x

Happy 40th Birthday to Papunya Tula Artists who are a fine example of the sustainability of working with many.
Keith Stevens, Yaritji Stevens and Nyapari kids perform ngintaka inma, Nyapari, 2012
Photo Joanna Byrne, courtesy Tjungu Palya

Nancy Jackson working on her painting in the Warakurna Artists studio, Warakurna, 2012
Photo Rhett Hammerton, courtesy Warakurna Artists
Palya!

Margo Neale

Principal Indigenous Advisor & Senior Curator, National Museum Australia
Adj/Professor ANU (History)

\[^{1}\text{Jane Young, Chair of Desart}\]
\[^{2}\text{The art centre panel, Indigenous Art Centres: Hubs for Innovation, was convened by Big hArt at Parliament House, Canberra, 15 September 2011. Panel members included Jane Young (Chair of Desart), Phillip Watkins (CEO Desart), Milyika Carroll (Director Anangku Art), Prof. Jon Altman (ANU), MP Nigel Scullion, NT and The Hon. Simon Crean, Indigenous Affairs.}\]
\[^{3}\text{Jane Young, Indigenous Art Centres: Hubs for Innovation, 15 September 2011, Canberra}\]
\[^{4}\text{From the British novel The Go-Between, 1953 by LP Hartley, popularised by Harold Pinter in the 1970s}\]
\[^{5}\text{Philip Watkins, Indigenous Art Centres: Hubs for Innovation, 15 September 2011, Canberra}\]
\[^{6}\text{For details see http://ippha.anu.edu.au/songlines-western-desert/}\]
\[^{7}\text{Ara Irititja is an interactive multi-media cultural archive established in 1994 by Anangu communities. For details see http://www.irititja.com}\]
\[^{8}\text{Nicolas Rothwell, “Mysteries of Desert Kings stay concealed among the trees”, The Australian, March 1, 2012}\]
\[^{9}\text{For details see http://www.palyafund.org.au/}\]
\[^{10}\text{Michael Bodey, “Tony Briggs’s film The Sapphires is as good as gold”, Weekend Australian, 28 July, 2012}\]
Alice Springs

Mwerre Anthurre Artists (Bindi Inc)
Greenbush Art Group
Ngurratjuta Ilitja Nijarra
Papunya Tula Artists
Tangentyere Artists
Tjapu Desert Weavers
Yarrenyty-Arltere Artists
Nyrupaya Kaika-Burton, Yarlji Young and Ilawanti Ken working on their birds during artists’ camp near Amata for Tandanya commission, 2011

Photo Jo Foster, courtesy Tjanpi Desert Weavers
The Pound, Balgo, 2012
Photo Basil Sunfly, courtesy of Warlayirti Artists