Desert Mob 2010
Desert Mob 2010
Cover
Harry Tjutjuna Wati Ngintaka, Wati Nyiru, Wanka and Kungka Tjuta, 2009
Acrylic on linen 202 x 264 cm
Araluen Art Collection
Purchased from Desert Mob 2009

Image this page
Harry Tjutjuna standing in front of his painting
Ninuku Artists - Photo: Bronwyn Taylor

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Each year, as the Desert Mob exhibition reveals its brilliance, the country of Central Australia unites to unveil a big story of its first peoples; an overwhelming testament to the artist’s collective ownership and connections to the land, with its myriad narratives. The Exhibition, and the works it presents, are representative of a connection to land and to places, throughout all the language groups and families that share the storylines of the Region, as they radiate out from their display place in Anmerte country, to the countries of the Luritja, Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi, Yankunytjatjara, Ngaanyatjara, Ngaatjatjara, Martu, Walmajari, Kukatja, Warlpiri, Walmanpa, Waramungu, Alywarr, Anmatyerr, Pintupi-Luritja and Kaytetye peoples.

Starting life as the Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Exhibition, the Exhibition changed its name to The Desert Mob Art Show in 1997, with a further change, to its current name of Desert Mob in 1999. The first Exhibition catalogue, accompanying the first Exhibition in 1991, stated that:

The Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Exhibition brings to art lovers the most diverse and exciting artwork and craft presently being produced...Araluen sees this exhibition as a major step forward for Central Australian Aboriginal artists and crafts people, and look forward to it becoming an annual event.

Twenty years on, and the same is still true of the artwork, while the aspiration for the Exhibition to become an annual event has been realised. The first Exhibition featured works from 12 artist collectives, with one of the art co-ordinators represented, along with one commercial gallery, reflecting the collaborative processes that have continued between Aboriginal artists, arts administrators, visiting artists and commercial galleries throughout the last two decades.

The Araluen Art Collection, housed at the Araluen Arts Centre, contains works which document the complete history of Desert Mob’s evolution, and as such, an evolution of arts practice in the Region. The Collection aspires to be representative of all art forms and community styles that have continued to emerge each year, with an emphasis on a representation of artists from all language groups.

The value of this Collection is enormous. Firstly, it provides a tangible and historic record of the Exhibition itself, and the changing nature of the artwork produced over the last 20 years. Secondly, for all residents and visitors to Alice Springs, it provides a visual archive from which they can learn, appreciate, research and come to understand the history of arts practice in the Region. And thirdly, and most importantly, it retains stories of country and ancestors and place in a central location in the artwork’s country of origin, creating an ongoing and lasting opportunity for both cultural maintenance and cross cultural exchange.

Just as the artists will tell you, making artwork is having country in mind, where the importance of keeping country strong is the fundamental mantra underlying the production of art. So, just as the first Exhibition contained a wish for the future, so do I now suggest a new materialisation. I wish for the Collection to be added to and strengthened by external support, where collectors and people who think it’s important, consider returning works from the Region’s art centres back to this country. Housed in a central point in their county of origin, here at the Araluen Arts Centre, we can continue to add to the story we can tell here so far, and lay the ground work for the story to come to be told, as the art centre movement continues to unfurl and unfold, in all its diversity and all its complexity, with its innate cultural, intellectual and artistic integrity.

Tim Rollason
Director
Araluen Cultural Precinct
Message from Desart

At this twentieth anniversary of Desert Mob, it is important that we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of Desert Mob over the best part of a generation.

For the majority of its history Desert Mob has involved a long-standing partnership between the Araluen Arts Centre and Desart, representing the community art centres that are the primary stakeholders of the event. This means that Desert Mob has always been something of a litmus test for the art centre movement across the years. It has tracked the great and emerging Central Australian artists and it has been an incredible showcase for a burgeoning development of art centre organisations.

Twenty years ago there were fewer than 20 art centres. Many people will also recall the outstanding work coordinated by ‘Flick’ Wright for Desart in the Art & Craft Centre Story, which documented 39 art centres in 1999. Now there are more than 100 art centres across the nation. Desert Mob sees almost half of these art centres represented annually in Alice Springs.

We have also seen the growth of peak organisations playing a key role in resourcing, promoting and advocating for artists working in art centres. Desart is proud to be associated with Ananguku Arts in SA, Umi Arts in Qld and the developing WA Aboriginal Art Centre Hub. Of course, our ongoing association with ANKAAA as the first peak organisation for Aboriginal artists is a key relationship. Over the past few years the combined voice of the peak organisations has been a powerful influence in a number of key developments.

The role of Araluen Arts Centre and other agencies has been considerable. Araluen Arts Centre has been a key venue not just for Desert Mob, but also for a valuable series of exhibitions on an annual basis. The Araluen Art Collection is indicative of the interest and professionalism of the staff at Araluen Arts Centre over a long period. There is now a genuine discussion about a national touring exhibition involving the Desert Mob brand and we are keen to work further with Araluen Arts Centre and Artback NT to make this a reality.

As Araluen Arts Centre is the key public art space in Alice Springs our relationship with the NT Government is critical. Arts NT have supported Desert Mob for many years and we are keen to take up the challenges of a newly created arts policy that will take the NT forward as an innovative, vibrant arts environment. Desert Mob has become a key annual event in the arts calendar of the NT. It plays a significant role in arts tourism and the income it generates for artists and for the Alice Springs economy each year is critical. We are keen to look for new opportunities and new features to ensure that Desert Mob remains vital, alive and attractive into the future.

Over the past few years there has been genuine increases in the number of Aboriginal people at Desert Mob employed as artworkers manning stalls and representing art centres with a personal and visible presence. We maintain the Desert Mob Symposium as a unique vehicle devoted entirely to the stories and experience of Aboriginal artists. In the past two years Desart has engaged with some 70 Aboriginal Artworkers keen to take up a renewed interest in administrative tasks in art centres.

My sincere thanks to the many who make this event so special; the artists, art centre managers and staff, Desart staff and our friends at Araluen Arts Centre for their very genuine commitment to the continued success of Desert Mob.

John Oster
Executive Officer
Desart

left
Sally M Mulda painting at Tangentyere Artists
Tangentyere Artists - Photo: Sia Cox
**Tommy Mitchell**

Wakalpuka, 2010

Acrylic on canvas 101 x 76 cm

Warakurna Artists
Desert Mob 2010
Tiger Palpati
Piltati ka Wati Tjakura, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 199 x 122 cm
Tjungu Palya
**Beyula Napanangka**

*Untitled*, 2010
Acrylic on linen 152 x 122 cm
Papunya Tjupi Art Centre
Justin Hayes
Morning Star, 2009
Acrylic on linen 104 x 85 cm
Keringke Arts
Tjaduwa Woods
Artulinga, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 102 x 60 cm
Spinifex Arts Project
Naata Nungurrayi
Untitled, 2008
Acrylic on linen 122 x 91 cm
Papunya Tula Artists
Billy Tjampijinpa Kenda
Car, truck and aeroplane near Jay Creek, 2010
Acrylic on linen 25 x 91 cm
Mwene Anthurme Artists

Sally Mulda
Inarlenge (Little Siders Town Camp), 2010
Acrylic on metal 14 x 28 x 5 cm
Tangentyere Artists
Marie Abbott
Finke Gorge, 2010
Watercolour on paper 54 x 23 cm
Nguratjuta Ilja Ntjara
Sadie Singer
Old trucks, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 100 x 120 cm
Iwantja Arts
Nyamapyl Giles
Warrumungu, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 182 x 179 cm
Tjarlirli Art
Niningka Lewis
Piti, 2010
River red gum 32 x 28 x 26 cm
Maruku Arts
Mary Anne Nampijinpa Michaels
Lappi Lappi Jukurpa, 2010
Acrylic on linen 107 x 91 cm
Warlukurlangu Artists
Betty Munti
Punu Tjukulpa (Tree full of stories), 2010
Raffia, minari grass and emu feathers 33 x 48 x 46 cm
Tjanpi Desert Weavers
Jimmy Donegan
Papa Tjukupa, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 120 x 107 cm
Ninuku Arts
left

Tracey Latu-Kuli-Kefu
Ngunna Murra (Hunting mallee fowl), 2010
Acrylic on canvas 183 x 97 cm
Tjukurba Art Gallery

right

Sonya Murphy
Rain Dreaming, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 175 x 97 cm
Arlpwe Art and Culture Centre
Dickie Minyintiri
Wati wilyu-ku inma Tjukurpa, 2010
Acrylic on linen 155 x 184 cm
Ernabella Arts
Dada Samson and Judith Samson
Rabbit proof fence, 2010
Acrylic on linen 300 x 122 cm
Martumili Artists
Wawiriya Burton
Ngayuku Ngura, 2010
Acrylic on linen 152 x 122 cm
Tjala Arts
Taylor Cooper
Watingku kulata palyani, 2010
Acrylic on linen 61 x 122 cm
Kaltjiti Arts and Crafts
Ailsa Laidlaw
Untitled, 2010
Acrylic on linen 70 x 167 cm
Kayili Artists
Brian Young
Three Alice Springs stories, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 91 x 137 cm
Greenbush Art Group
left
Anmanari Brown
The seven sisters, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 100 x 50 cm
Papulankutja Artists

right
Theresa Nowee
Tjumu, 2010
Acrylic on linen 80 x 30 cm
Warlayirti Artists
**Flora Holt**

*Train*, 2009
Acrylic on canvas 46 x 118 cm
Julalikari Arts

**Rosie Lala**

*Mongu*, 2010
Acrylic on canvas 90 x 120 cm
Yaruman Art and Culture Centre
Amanda Turner
Waterhole, 2010
Acrylic on linen 98 x 90 cm
Inkerlantyre Arts
Lindy Rontji
Rock pigeon, 2009
Handbuilt terracotta clay, underglazes 34 x 27 x 26 cm
Hermannsburg Potters
Alice Nampitjinpa
Tali Tali, 2010
Acrylic on linen 100 x 100 cm
Ikuntji Artists
Dulcie Sharpe
Thorny devil, 2010
Natural dyed textile, 20 x 60 x 125 cm
Yarrenyty Artereal Artists
Milatjari Pumani
Ngura wasyila, Antara, 2010
Acrylic on linen 152 x 111 cm
Mimili Maku Arts
Desert Mob: ‘The Power of Unsettling Surprise’
Trajectory and scope of Western Desert Art

Judith Ryan

Indigenous art of the Western Desert belongs to the skin of now and has an undeniable edge. It issues from the body of the Australian continent and the spirit of its Indigenous artists who are the land they paint. It has not been transplanted or appropriated from any other visual art tradition: for the abstract iconography that lies at its heart is undeniably ancient. The concentric arc motif found engraved on rock near Mannahill, South Australia has been cation-ratio dated to over 20,000 years BP, along with other signs common to Western Desert art, such as bird and animal tracks, circles and peck marks (equivalent to dots). The presence of these symbols and signs as signifiers of meaning in today’s acrylic paintings testify to the continuity of this visual language and of connections to country that it encodes.

Much of the radical edge and pizzazz of contemporary Indigenous art results from its daring break with the ethnographic essentialism of ochres, which occurred dramatically in the centre of Australia, almost four decades ago when a momentous art movement originated at Papunya. It was only in 1971 that senior Aboriginal men changed the face of Australian art and the way we perceive the continent and its history by forging a spiritual and conceptual form of landscape painting — intuitive and powerfully symbolic — out of the elemental visual language shared by many different Western Desert peoples.

What distinguishes these radical acrylics from the bark paintings and sculptures of Arnhem Land is the nexus between modern materials and modes of production and archetypal designs that are bearers of sanctity and wisdom. These horizonless visions of country — sung, danced and deeply felt — are not artefacts but art of a very sophisticated kind. Bold linear gestures, fields of vibrant colour and the visual music of pointillist dotting open up new ways of seeing and reading what for Europeans has been an unfathomable continent, beheld as the ‘emptiest of lands’. During the 1970s and 80s, this ‘non-tribal’ form of acrylic painting, modern in its medium and spirit, proved challenging to some European eyes. Predictably its revolutionary innovation of form and content met with some local resistance. Yet the visual qualities of the small boards and the spiritual mapping and optical shimmer of the large canvases occasioned synergies with shifting movements of western art: impressionism, abstract expressionism, conceptual art, op art and minimalism. Eventually European art historians and critics were convinced of the undoubted importance of Western Desert art and heralded the genesis of a major ‘contemporary art movement, Australia’s equivalent to, say, European cubism or American abstract expressionism’.¹
Initially, however, senior Western Desert lawmen regarded the Papunya Tula artists’ mimetic depiction of secret/sacred aspects of men’s law as sacrilegious, a perception that persisted through the 1980s and delayed the advent of painting for the commercial market across Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) and Ngaanyatjarra Lands until the advent of a new millennium.

The first significant offshoot of the Papunya Tula revolution did not occur until 1986 when acrylic painting was adopted in Yuendumu, Lajamanu and Balgo, and a fauve art of bright colour was forged. Warlpiri and Kutjungka women — custodians of ritual and of sacred sites — have since made their presence felt as painters of daring invention, initially gaining permission from male custodians to use dots in their acrylic paintings. Their emergence as independent artists was preceded by a long gestation period of over three decades of craft and batik production at Emabella, Fregon and later Utopia. Eventually in 1988–89 and 1994 Anmatyerr and Alyawarr women and their Pintupi countrywomen made the transition to canvas.

Issuing from a suspicion of earlier manifestations of the Western Desert Art movement, the first large Ngaanyatjarra canvases were produced at Warburton in 1990, not for the commercial market but to be kept as a community collection. In parallel with an initiative to foster cultural practices that had been sequestered during mission days, the Warburton Arts Project founded an art glass manufacturing facility in 1995 and the NPY Women’s Council nurtured a tjanpi project across Ngaanyatjarra lands, which resulted in the genesis of woven sculpture from spinifex grasses, sourced and manipulated through intimate local knowledge. One of the stars of this medium, Kunmanara Benson soon moved beyond reconfiguring manguri (head rings), piti (coolamons) and baskets, fashioning saucepans, frying pans, animals, and life-size human figures often imbued with a film noir intensity or quirkiness. In tandem with the tjanpi project and inspired by the Mabo Judgement of 1992, the Spinifex people mounted a Native Title claim over 55,000 kilometres of land and established the Spinifex Arts Project in 1997, as part of the broader Native Title process, to record and document ownership of the Spinifex Area.

Painting on canvas for the commercial market across APY and Ngaanyatjarra Lands remained sporadic until post 2001, when Anangu women in Irrunytju, already involved with the NPY tjanpi weaving project, succeeded in raising sufficient funds to establish their own painting outlet. Since this initiative, acrylic painting has spread apace through a cluster of tiny APY and Ngaanyatjarra communities that radiate outwards from the tri-state border. Word of the painting movement has also filtered through to the Martu people, many of whom ceased living a pujiman (nomadic, desert) life only in the 1950s and 1960s. Established in Newman in October 2006, Martumili Artists services Martu homeland centres of Parnngurr, Punmu, Kunawarritji, Jigalong and Imungadji, thereby enabling artists to live and work in their own communities.

The latest wave of Western Desert art like others before it expresses the artists’ cultural memories of growing up in pujiman days and articulates the creation stories that are embedded in its geographical features, water sources, flora and fauna. It teems with signs and symbols of ancestors in a mythological topography that conjure forth the songs of tjukurpa, forming mnemonic maps of the land. Each new canvas is painted as a fresh adventure not as a tired formulaic commodity, expressing the bones and spirit of country
through a music of colour. The designs issue from an artist's whole body — the strength of a body's gesture — not just from fingers trained to hold a pencil. The iconography of the paintings — dense with story and meaning like seeds of a pomegranate waiting to burst and spill their secret individual juices — is not manipulated by western aesthetic taste and does not conform to the dictates of minimalism.

**Desert Mob 1991–2010**

By 1990 Western Desert art had etched its way into the consciousness of the Australian public and, driven by its sheer dynamism and a strong community involvement, Desert Mob was inaugurated at the Araluen Arts Centre in 1991. September 2010 marks the twentieth anniversary of this annual Mparntwe (Alice Springs) event, which gives a public stage to the longest standing and newest manifestations of art from the desert, across a broad range of media. From its grassroots beginnings Desert Mob has grown a rich and singular life. Governed by Indigenous-owned art centres, each of which selects a body of work for exhibition, nominating its chosen artists, Desert Mob has become a farrago of the latest works to surface from tiny desert homelands or from the town centre itself — burning with intensity, a minutiae of detail, kitsch or experimentally raw. Like the much larger and more disparate National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) survey, Desert Mob presents a snapshot in time, an unveiling and empowering of the latest rising stars and endearing senior figures, gaining timbre and significance through its constant interconnections and depth of context.

But Desert Mob, as suggested by its colloquial title, is an egalitarian exhibition of a ‘big mob’ of art from a particular cultural and geographical region. It does not purport to do justice to Indigenous art from the whole continent. Furthermore, it is an unmediated selection, unmitigated by notions of political correctness, or the competitive value judgements and jealousies occasioned by the awarding of prizes and the prejudging of entries. No notions of ‘Aboriginal Art: It’s a White Thing’ censure its spirit of celebration and the honouring of authoritative tjilpi. The unashamed focus on the red centre and furthest reaches of the desert expanse, affords all of its participating artists a vital cultural context and depth of field. Against the longevity of Emabellia batik, Arrente watercolours or Papunya Tula painting, viewers can glimpse the quirkiness of tjapiti animals, wire and metallic cowboys, landscapes on timber offcuts, hand painted furniture, large felt animals or the emergence of wondrous Anangu and Martu colourists. Given the push and pull of desert people to travel vast distances for men’s and women’s business, beanie festivals, Aussie Rules football carnivals or communal art making, Desert Mob enables a spirit of community to take over the Araluen Arts Centre as artists clad in colourful beanies come together en masse to celebrate the indelible power of their art. It also provides a platform for collectors chasing after the hottest and latest forms of Indigenous art from the desert to view in depth the work of many art centres and emerging talents simultaneously, and often in unexpected media. Following viewing of the primary exhibition, the Desert Mob Marketplace gives to such avid collectors the adrenalin rush of searching for bargains by scouring through piles of previously rejected canvases direct from art centres.

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_left_  
Angkaliya Curtis working on a painting  
Tjungu Palya - Photo: Amanda Dent
Over its twenty-year history, Desert Mob has charted the exponential trajectory and the burgeoning scope and diversity of art practice throughout the desert. Multiple streams of Western Desert art and experiments in new media, supported by Indigenous owned art centres, have surfaced since the origin of Papunya Tula in 1971–72, and more particularly during the past two decades. Fresh expressions of Indigenous art have also been stimulated in the town centre of Mparntwe, home of the Eastern Arrernte and Alyawarr people, where Mwerre Anthurre Artists (Bindi Inc), Ngurratjuta Il tj a N tj ara and Tangentyere Artists have enabled local residents, separated from ancestral country, to image it on Arches paper, salvaged timber, or canvas. Billy Benn stands tall as an example of many of the artists from Mwerre Anthurre Artists (Bindi Inc) who work in a state of diaspora, severed from their birth country for much of their lives. Benn recollects and conceives country in all its particularity with a towering compassion and longing. The merest touch of tone or colour concentrates topography and creates for Benn and the viewer a sense of being in country that is cultural and spiritual yet is profoundly palpable.

Arrernte watercolours, the earliest works produced in Central Australia for the commercial market and a vital prelude to the genesis of the Papunya Tula movement, are mainstays of Desert Mob. Today ever younger Arrernte artists are imaging their country with fresh immediacy, nurtured by the town-based art centre, Ngurratjuta Il tja N tj ara, whilst Arrernte women at Ntaria (Hermannsburg), introduced to ceramics in 1990 continue to build lidded terracotta pots and also paint canvases that record mission life or celebrate their colour country.

Under the overarching banner of Desart, this year’s bumper Desert Mob exhibition encompasses nearly forty Indigenous owned art centres, stretching as far north as Tennant Creek and north west as Balgo, southwards to Kaltjiti and far west into the Pilbara. Like previous Desert Mobs, Biennales or Art Fairs it will reveal that ‘the power of art is the power of unsettling surprise’. The staging of Desert Mob in its heartland, the centre of a cultural oasis with many offshoots, gives the event a special resonance. It is as if many sources of spiritual power stretching far away from Mparntwe are brought back into the exhibition space and become physically present as palpable portraits of individual artists’ identity and vision. So, closing in on Mparntwe are multiple far-flung countries, sung, danced and conceived with an intensity of gaze.

2 In 2003 Richard Bell won the NATSIAA with a provocative work entitled ‘Aboriginal Art: It’s a White Thing’, which questions the control of the marketing, collecting and presentation of Indigenous art by the colonising culture.
Everybody from all over comes in for Desert Mob

Jane Young

I grew up on Santa Teresa Mission. At that time there were a lot of ladies who used to paint. We used to just do it on lino prints and paint landscapes on T-shirts. We used to just work where the kids from the dormitories used to have their meals. We started off there. Mum used to do the sewing and we used to paint on T-shirts, on silk and then on shoes.

Later we got a little bit of funding for a building. Us women went looking for a spot for a building with Cait Wait who helped us put in for funding. We needed a place to store our materials, plenty of room for artists to sit down and paint, toilets and a sink. We found a place. It’s still there. It’s called Keringke Arts.

I moved into Alice Springs when my dad got sick and my husband passed away. Then I stopped painting for a while. My granddaughter asked me to paint again. I started painting with Irkerlantye Arts in Alice Springs.

Now I paint with Tangentyere Artists. We have ladies coming from all different camps, speaking all different languages - but we all understand each other. Mondays we come to do workshops for people who want to come and sit down. It’s nice to sit. Art centres are friendly places for all artists to get together. It’s about caring and sharing. An arts centre is not a sad place. It’s a happy place.

Everybody from all over comes in for Desert Mob. Every art centre in the Central Desert that are members of Desart. It’s exciting for Aboriginal artists to come in and bring their artwork and see it up on the walls. On opening night everybody goes in to see everybody’s work. And it’s exciting when they see the red dots going up and they know it’s been sold. The next day they set up their little stalls for the MarketPlace and sell artefacts, jewellery, and canvases that are more affordable.

When people come in for Desert Mob they see all the different styles from the art centres. We’ve all got different styles. People coming to Desert Mob who don’t know about art centres can learn about who the art centres are and what we’re doing.
What’s the buzz: Desert Mob

Erica Izett

Desert Mob pulls a crowd like few other annual art events. The Golden Globes of the Aboriginal art world, its buzz is tangible. Curators and collectors fly to the red zone from all around the continent, converging with the locals to revel in the abundance on offer. Speculation and gossip abound. Artists shadowed by minders and adoring fans grace the opening in numbers that exceed any other whitefella initiative in Alice bar rock concerts. This is because it’s their gig and like few other venues it’s a chance to strut the stuff of each desert crew.

Because Desert Mob showcases the pick of each desert art centre, it offers the rare privilege to tap the pulse of the trendsetters. Who’s still got it and the latest push and directions are the hype of the moment. For most people it offers a golden opportunity to acquire fresh new work from a sea of choice, along with an exceptional chance to meet artists from all across the desert region under one roof. The rush to score from its wealth involves a long wait for the doors to open and no time for rumination. While there has been criticism of this melee - it introduces an element of democracy into an industry in which some complain of difficulties in accessing the best work. Whatever the grumbles of those who miss out or buy unwisely, it gives the exhibition a lively edge. To appreciate great art needs time but his exhibition is about more than this; it’s a celebration of the best with an additional festive Territorian atmosphere.

For art collectors the line-up of the ‘big five’ Centres, desert safari style, is intoxicating. While connoisseurs can attend an exhibition from a particular art centre or a solo show with relative ease, it’s much harder to get a good overview of the whole desert region. Survey or award shows sometimes come close but you miss the depth and comprehension of development that the latter reveals. This is the distinction of Desert Mob. Within the vast matrix of cultural activity across the interior, it provides a rare synopsis of its public product. Further, its secret triumph - ‘quality/authenticity’ - the vital elusive ingredient that, despite all best intentions, is so difficult to secure under constant market demand.

To take in less than half these Centres by road, would take thousands of kms, a couple of months, 10 tanks of fuel, three spare tyres, a few years off your life and certainly a large dent in the bank account. On the other hand: to sidestep dodgy campsites, being rained out, bogged in, or finding ‘closed’ signs on arrival.

Yaritji Young collecting grass at Amata
Tjanpi Desert Weavers - Photo: Jo Foster

Naomi Kantjuri and weavers at Amata artist camp
Tjanpi Desert Weavers - Photo: Anna Cadden
or the standard, ‘sorry, you should have been here last week’ (all the good work has just been packed and sent off, or sold out), makes it abundantly clear that the more canny and veteran approach is setting aside one weekend to attend Desert Mob.

This is an event that no serious collector or curator can afford to miss. Each Centre’s display is in competition with its peers. And while one of the best qualities of Desert Mob is its feel-good inclusiveness, it can also expose and cruelly unravel a reputation. The experienced art centres understand that you must come up with a good hand. There is no room for bluff.

To the uninitiated the exhibition sprawls across Araluen in a blur of colour. To the trained eye it reads as a musical score. It needs a skilled eye to conduct the final orchestration. Over the years this exhibition has consistently prophesied the new vogue despite fears and continual speculation of drought or passing of maestros. It’s a hard act to follow but year after year it delivers. Thus, most of all, it affirms the role of the art centres in the production of Aboriginal art.

For all the human failures and limitations that constrain them, art centres remain an essentially positive force. Positioned at the heart of their communities, guided by their elect Indigenous councils, art centres are almost always inclusive hubs of empowerment and Indigenous pedagogy and a beacon of hope against the grind of social dysfunction. When healthy, these organisations spread feeders internally and outwardly. They strengthen and benefit collectively, and creatively enrich and fortify communities across the board. Art centres have been central players in the social, political and cultural revolution that has occurred over the last 30 years.

To positively engage with Desert Mob and ensure its continuing success, we must also continually assess its purpose and performance. Success, especially too much success, always conceals within it dangers. In the case of Desert Mob, for example, its very success hails it as a prime event for the commercial sector to identify the cream of the crop. This is a great achievement. However, it has also made it easier for unscrupulous dealers to profit without due recompense from the enormous work of the art centres to nurture artists (eg holding professional workshops, organising overseas and interstate travel and exhibitions, slowly orchestrating careers with the help of galleries, public collections, articles, books and film). Just as the art and its marketing has evolved so too must art centres in their engagement with the commercial sector. To survive they urgently need to map out a viable future in concert with the wider sector. Neither they nor Desert Mob can afford to rest on past success.

For most of their life art centres have been burdened by the mantra of economic rationalism that has sounded since the late 80s. This only increased with the success of Aboriginal art, or the success of a small minority of superstar artists. The contradiction between commercial imperatives and myriad social roles of an art centre is a delicate and volatile balancing act. Nevertheless many interest groups feed off the fruit of their labours. The complications of wide ranging work, from the very high end to the low end, require different strategies. The high end of the market is best left to professionals, galleries, with the usual arrangements they have with other artists they represent - as some commentators have been arguing -
and market forces are already making happen. This would greatly simplify the life of art centres if it were not for the need of their successful artists to financially and psychologically underwrite their myriad of other activities that commercial art dealers are not expected to perform. If the best artists are to enjoy the benefits that the best white artists do, then Aboriginal communities need to be subsidised to the same extent that the white community is - with its art schools and endless other community services. Imagine if the commercial sector of the white art world was expected to not just subsidise but also to fulfil all the other roles of an Aboriginal art centre.

If we allow art centres to be squeezed, exploited or neglected, whole communities suffer. Take note, it is an exceptional cultural development that unlike any other in Australia, not only underwrites an international tourist industry, but is the only Australian cultural expression to gain a global profile. These exceptional hubs of action and creativity, critical zones of cultural interaction, refuge and production, are the main root systems of the remote Indigenous art movement. If they are fleeced of their ‘star’ artists they will cease to shine. Desert Mob is a truly fabulous celebration of all the art centres have achieved. If they are to retain the leading position they have developed over the last 20 years they need to continue to provide leadership and maintain their relevance, in the always changing world of contemporary times.
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left: Bernard Tjalkuri painting at Tjungu Palya
Tjungu Palya - Photo: Amanda Dent
Contributors

**Judith Ryan** received a BA Honours in Fine Arts and English Literature at the University of Melbourne in 1970 and a Certificate in Education at Oxford University in 1972. She began her Art Museum career in 1977 at the National Gallery of Victoria where she is currently the Senior Curator of Indigenous Art. Judith's special interest is Indigenous Australian art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries — its diversity, dynamism and transformation in the face of social change.

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**Erica Izett** is a former art coordinator of Warlayirti Artists and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia.

**Jane Young** is an Eastern Arrernte woman from Santa Teresa. She has been an artist for many years and was a founding member of Keringke Arts and now paints with Tangentyere Artists in Alice Springs. Jane is currently the Desert Chairperson.

Dog chilling out at Mimili Maku Arts
Mimili Maku Arts - Photo: Hannah Grace