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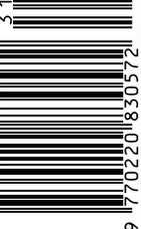


ISSUE 31 · AUGUST to OCTOBER 2020

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AUS \$19.95 NZ \$25.00

ISSN 0220-830X



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Art dealer Ralph Hobbs shares a personal account of working with his friend the late, great Pitjantjatjara artist Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri.



REMEMBERING BILL WHISKEY TJAPALTJARRI

FEATURE *by* RALPH HOBBS

I met Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri in 2007 at his home in the little desert community of Watiyawanu, Mount Liebig – about an hour's drive west of Papunya. It was built in the early 1980s and is a curious mix of buildings, typical of the remote townships. Papunya is famous as the epicentre of the Western Desert painting movement of the early 1970s. This movement would eventually change the perception of Australian visual culture in the eyes of the world.

Mount Liebig had been built to help placate the inter-tribal disharmony between Luritja and Pintupi people. It also provided a settlement between the network of desert communities, from Haarts Bluff and Papunya, to the far west homelands around Kintore and beyond. It is geographically important for those who live and travel in the desert today. They still have a strong sense of the 'nomad' coursing through their veins – although it's been decades since they, or their parents and grandparents, had been encouraged to leave their ancestral homelands to come into the seemingly-easier white man's life. As history has demonstrated, what was promised and what has transpired have been two different things.

The morning we met was bright and cool, with the sunlight bouncing off the imposing Liebig Range. I was travelling with Ken McGregor, the man who can be credited with taking Bill Whiskey to the world with an extraordinary exhibition of paintings in London in 2007. There are few

roads in the desert that Ken hasn't travelled. As we pulled up to the Watiyawanu Art Centre, we were greeted by the enigmatic Glenis Wilkins.

Glenis was the coordinator of the art centre – she had lived in the community for some twenty years. Nothing got past her; tough and forthright, she possessed a much-needed withering sense of humour and a heart that embraced all. Glenis was integral to Whiskey's well-being. The artist was sitting astride a large canvas, semi-rolled as if it were an ancient scroll which, in many respects, it was. A small camp dog hovered nearby, occasionally straying onto the canvas before being moved swiftly on by the artist's broad hand. Whiskey looked up smiling and we exchanged greetings. He spoke little English. Whiskey was a Pitjantjatjara man from the desert south west of there. Originally walking out, he returned to a nomadic life with his family before eventually settling in this community.

There was a magnetism about the man, revered throughout the area not only for his painting, but also for his powers as a Ngangkari – a traditional healer. His ability to cure all manner of afflictions with his hands and songs was well known and utilised by those around him. It's a difficult thing to rationalise in a contemporary world where belief has given way to science, yet the stories of his gifts about the desert in hushed tones to this day.

Portrait Bill Whiskey
Tjapaltjarri Mt Liebig, 2008
Photo: Ralph Hobbs



The belief system was such that the old people of the desert ruled all aspects of their lives. Understanding the ways and the laws (natural and mythological) of the desert was a matter of life and death. Their Tjukurpa, or Dreaming, explains why things are the way they are. It is history, the present and the future all in one. And for those people who took up art making to keep the stories preserved and alive, it provided a rich and often secret narrative source for their painting. This intrinsic understanding of the stories is one of the defining distinctions between great Indigenous painting and the less meaningful works that abound in tourist art galleries.

For Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri, ancestral song lines morphed easily into the visual form – words and hypnotic verses became tightly curated dots and lines across the

picture plane. There is a rhythm to his language that is accentuated with the waves of white dots that flow throughout his work. Echoes of tones and colours sit richly behind the frenetic dotting and bright colours. Reds, blues and oranges appear through the haze of white that harmonise the expansive canvases that are as vast as the land that spawned Whiskey's Tjukurpa.

The Cockatoo Dreaming story was recounted to Ken and me through broken English.

As with all sacred stories in the desert, Whiskey revealed only the part that the uninitiated were permitted to hear. There is much we don't know about this tale of greed, jealousy, sex and revenge, veiled behind the beauty of the artist's hand and brush. The tale is set in the country west of Uluru, near Kata Tjuta. In the

Dreamtime, a cockatoo was preparing a feast of kangaroo when a jealous crow tried to steal part of the meal. The inevitable fight created large holes in the ground that became the rock holes. The white feathers turned to quartz stone chips, scattered on the red earth (the genesis of the white painted dots). The crow hit the cockatoo with a rock, injuring her terribly. An eagle that witnessed the fracas came to the aid of the cockatoo, leading the crow to believe that she would make love to him. The crow, eagerly waiting in anticipation, had his joy cut short as the eagle poured hot spinifex wax on his genitals. Shamed and in pain, the crow flew away, leaving the history of the encounter etched forever in the landscape. This would be the country that Whiskey's ancestors would travel and look after for millennia.

Bill Whiskey did not have a long painting career. He came to it late in life. In the early 2000s he walked into the art centre and asked for some canvas. For some time he remained unknown, primarily due to his remote location. That is until McGregor, on one of his expeditions, visited Mount Liebig by chance. The painting room was open. He describes the epiphany that hit him when he first saw the old man painting – he had stumbled on one of the unknown greats of the late desert movement. A few short years later, Whiskey was considered one of the most collectable artists to have come from this country.

The artist's inclusion in major art awards and the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria – which owns the epic, five metre canvas *Rockholes and country near Kata Tjuta* (2007) – underpinned the curatorial reverence he received in his

lifetime. Whiskey was a methodical and slow worker – his richly layered canvases required time. He was not a man to be rushed, nor did he fall into the trap of over-production and substandard, questionable work that has destroyed the potential of many great artists. The artist's entire oeuvre would number only a few hundred works.

Bill Whiskey's career was as short as it was bright. Tragically, in 2008, a bronchial condition deteriorated. It would be the tyranny of distance, his age and the cold desert air that rapidly took Whiskey from this world. Glenis held his hand; it was an enduring friendship to the end. His passing was felt throughout the land. An MP announced his death to the Northern Territory Parliament: "The King of the Western Desert has died." When we talk of him now in the desert, he is referred to as 'That Old Man', in the tradition of not speaking the name of deceased people.

Despite his passing, and a contraction of the Indigenous art market after the 2008 global financial crisis, interest in Bill Whiskey and other great painters has grown. In the last decade, significant collectors have embraced the unique vision of 'That Old Man'. Melbourne Indigenous art dealer D'lan Davidson's tightly curated forays into the North American market – in conjunction with the world's foremost commercial gallery, Gagosian, and with further exhibitions planned for Hong Kong in 2021 – have brought the major moments in Australian Indigenous art into sharp focus.

As Davidson explains: "Prominent collectors in America immediately recognised the work of Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri as individual, lyrical and special. They are predominantly interested in the

very finest and rarest of his works that were created on a grand scale. These works are now seen within the broader lens of great international art, not just through the limited context of 'Aboriginal Art'."

There is much to learn from the desert people, especially when it is shared in a profoundly beautiful and powerful way. It is difficult not to be moved by the gravitas of Bill Whiskey's greatest paintings. The smallest of clues unlock some of the mystery of the desert, transporting us to another place, another time. Ultimately, it allows us to see this land in a deeper way. That is a legacy worthy of the greatest reverence – by a country in search of icons for all that inhabit this place. **V**

Enquiries about Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri should be made to Aboriginal Artists Agency Limited and Nanda/Hobbs, Sydney.
aboriginalartists.com.au
nandahobbs.com

Above
BILL WHISKEY TJPALTJARRI
Rockholes and country near Kata Tjuta, 2007
 synthetic polymer paint on canvas
 120 x 520 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 Purchased, NGV Supporters of Indigenous Art, 2008
 © The Artists/Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Limited

Bottom
BILL WHISKEY TJPALTJARRI
Rockholes and Country near the Olgas, 2006
 acrylic on linen
 183 x 270 cm

Opposite
BILL WHISKEY TJPALTJARRI
Rockholes and Country near the Olgas, 2007
 acrylic on linen
 182 x 270 cm

Provenance: Watiyawanu Artists of Amunturngu, Mount Liebig Nanda/Hobbs

