

*A way of reasserting and sharing identity: acrylic paintings of the Central Desert. A critical approach.*

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**Abstract:** Many different discourses about the “new” Aboriginal art forms, especially Acrylic Paintings of the Central Desert, have been constructed during the last 30 years. These constructions have attempted to explain the role, the meaning and the reception of that art form, both in a local arena (concerning the communities in which it is produced) and in an (inter)national one. Such explanatory discourses are used to exceed the specific object of study – the works of acrylic on canvas – becoming general and descriptive views of the whole art-production of Aboriginal society, as well as of their culture and their identity. Moreover, these constructions came from two different fields that traditionally – from the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> onwards – have competed for the imposition and hegemony of their views: one related to the artistic sphere (mainly art criticism) and the other related to anthropological and ethnological studies.

This article suggests an approach to the Acrylic Paintings of the Central Desert as an element of identity, reasserting as well as a place for Aboriginal cross-cultural understanding. From a critical point of view, many core topics *-tropos-* from classical discourses about Acrylic Painting -such as the Dreaming, the land, aesthetics, the role of socialization and the power of the representational system of geometric forms- will be discussed. In order to achieve the former, the mutually excluding polarization between Art and Anthropology has been avoided thus bringing together both perspectives. Furthermore, the aim is to recover the too-long-forgotten voices of the artists involved by disregarding the mainstream colonial discourse.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal acrylic painting – post-colonial Aboriginal identity

Nowadays, most of the discourses related to Australian Aboriginal art point out that the acrylic paintings on canvas of the Central Desert communities is one of the great contemporary markers of Aboriginal identity. Moreover, most of the interpretations about these acrylic works read them as the real motor of a renewal of Aboriginal desert culture(s) and identity in the post-colonial context (Caruana 2000).

In my opinion, following Myers approach<sup>2</sup>, these acrylic works of the Central Desert region are regarded as a new phenomenon where traditional meanings and forms, on the

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one hand, and materials and contemporary artistic objectives, on the other, are mixed together. The genesis of this contemporary phenomenon is related to the so-called *dot art movement*. This artistic movement was born in the Central Desert region during the 70s and is strongly marked by the use of the traditional “geometric system of representation” (Morphy 1980, 1991, 1999), also called “code of abstract symbolism” (Johnson 2000:214), and the transmission of the Dreaming knowledge. In the early seventies, Papunya and Yuendumu were the first and also the main communities involved, but the movement quickly spread out to the rest of the desert communities and became one of the principal economical activities for them. The genesis of this artistic movement is also related to the Australian historical context of the political struggle for the recognition of Indigenous peoples’ rights.

This relationship between the artistic movement (*dot art movement*) with the political, economical and socio-cultural levels is the reason why the success of the works is read and interpreted as an assertion of the Desert communities’ identity in the Australian post-colonial context.

The present essay analyses the discourse(s) of assertion and renewal, with the final aim of giving a critical approach to it/them and its/their reception in the so-called Western art market. In order to achieve this objective, the essay is divided into two different sections. The first one analyzes the already mentioned issue of identity in relationship to the fast growing artistic success of acrylic paintings on canvas. This analysis is focused on two areas: the communities’ productive arena, and the (inter)national arena. The second part of the essays concludes this analysis with some critical notes that may enable a rethinking of the interpretation and reception of the acrylic works in relation to the discourse of reassertion of Aboriginal identity.

## **Acrylic artistic success and Aboriginal post-colonial identity renewal. Analysis of the discourse.**

### **Analysis of the discourse in the communities’ productive context.**

In order to start the first part of the analysis, focused on the communities’ productive arena, and to facilitate understanding, four different fields related to the success of acrylic painting should be distinguished: the political, the economical and the socio-cultural. For each of them, only the main and most debated consequences of the artistic success will be pointed out in relation to the discourse of the reassertion of identity, in order to give an overview of the situation. Each of these fields constitutes an integral part of any construction of identity. They are different parts of the whole, while related to each other.

First of all, the *political* field is one of the clearest levels where the consequences of the success of these works allow a discussion of Aboriginal identity. The traditional meaning of the Aboriginal aesthetic practice is unavoidably linked to the primary relationship and the responsibilities of Aboriginal people with regard to their land. In the pre-colonial historical context, knowledge and also “country” were transmitted from

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<sup>2</sup> “For the Aborigines of Central Australia, the acrylic paintings on canvas (as well as the paintings on bark) are a *new* form, objects made for sale and not for their own ritual or practical use” (Myers 1991:27)

generation to generation through aesthetic practice. In other words, it is in the knowledge encoded in the aesthetic motifs and in the painted dreamings and stories from the Dreaming tradition where the responsibility of “to hold the country” (Bird 1992, Myers 2002) is learnt within each Aboriginal group (Morphy 1991).

The new acrylic art, using the traditional set of motifs and meaning, enables transmission and emphasizes that central relationship of Aboriginal culture(s) with the land. Through the new artistic practice and its success Australia's Indigenous people have been able to prove and demonstrate their sovereignty over the land; a fact denied since the proclamation of *terra nullis* by Sir Richard Bourke in 1835. Therefore, the new artistic practice quickly became a powerful instrument of political struggle (Stanton 2000).

This use of art to claim the native title of the land is admirably modelled in the *Barunga Statemen* (1988). A project which has its precedent in the *Bark petition* (1963)<sup>3</sup>. Those initiatives are symbolical moments in the struggle for the Aboriginal sovereignty over the land. And at the same time, both emphasize that the acrylic paintings are –as the traditional aesthetics were- a reassertion of the Aboriginal connection to the land. This relationship is one of the central and more characteristic issues of the Aboriginal identity.

Less symbolically than *Bark Petition* or *Barunga Statement* is the direct link between the early success of the acrylic works and the return to the so called “ancestral” lands by many groups during the 80s (Kean 2000). As Vivien Johnson –among other theorists- points out: “The self-repatriation of the Pintupi had only been possible because of the independent income generated by their paintings” (2000:214). Consequently, the artistic and economical success of the acrylic paintings impacted actively on the political struggle and helped to change the situation of delocalisation of many communities in the Central Desert forced out by the governmental policies of the mid 19th and 20th centuries.

The second notable level where the artistic success allows for the voicing of the reassertion of Aboriginal identity is the *economical* one. Many artists acknowledge and affirm that their artistic activity is closely linked with the income it represents<sup>4</sup>. These incomes are especially important for those communities that returned to their ancestral lands and which are established deep in the Australian desert.

Nowadays, the production of acrylic works for the fine art and the *souvenir* market is the most profitable Aboriginal industry in the Central Desert region. As John Oster affirms this cultural industry is “one of the key drivers in regional and remote Australia with comparable status as the cattle industry” (2006).

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<sup>3</sup> V. Yunupingu, G. (ed.) (1997) and also Morphy H. (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson (2000:216) mentions the following testimony of an Aboriginal painter, Cassidy: “We make plenty of money. We have plenty of good painters here. It is something my people always do well. Even the young fellas are getting interested in this. We can do work for ourselves for a change and not just take your government money”. This quotation remark the important link between economy and the new artistic practice in the context of Aboriginal self-esteem (Myers 1991).

Art centres are the core structures of that cultural industry. The control of the financial income and its return to the community-members is one of the principal tasks of art centres. The income generated by the artistic industry allows for an important degree of Aboriginal economical autonomy. Nevertheless, governmental support and subsidies are also needed by Aboriginal communities in the desert regions and its hinterland (Oster 2006).

The third signalled level where the consequences of artistic success clearly involve a reassertion of Aboriginal post-colonial identity is the *social* one. Changes in Aboriginal education of traditional Law and in the social cohesion of the communities' production are examples of this.

In Vivien Johnson's words (2000:217): "The desire to become an artist motivated individuals in Alice Springs to learn more about their Dreaming stories and designs (...)". This re-education (Ryan 1989:71-72), with "Aboriginality" at its centre, was needed by younger generations and middle-aged Aboriginal people who grew up in missions and who had denied-access to their own culture(s) due to governmental policies of assimilation during the 20th century. Moreover, this re-education was also needed in the context of the governmental reservations, where the social situation in general, as described by many researchers (Bardon (2000), Johnson (2000), Barou (1996), Barou & Crossman (2005)) was alarming during the 70s, particularly on the subject of "Aboriginality". Shame and embarrassment about Aboriginal roots was a common feeling for the younger generations. Elders saw the chance to proudly transmit their cultural inheritance again in the new desire to paint (Clark 2005, Johnson 2000, 2001:44)<sup>5</sup>.

Another consequence of the artistic success on the social level was the creation of art centres. These places opened a social space for communication, information and encounter with the mother culture(s) in each artistic community. The art centres also increased social cohesion through projects which aimed to encourage collective artistic creations (Dussart 1999). These collective projects reinforce group cohesion in different directions. On the one hand, they help to avoid the risk of individualization and the division of the communities into two separate groups of artists: the so called "no-names" and the so called "big names" which was a real threat after the 90s, (Johnson 2000:219, Errington 1998:155 –among others-). On the other hand, they reactivated the use of the traditional relationships with regards to the rights and responsibilities over the paintings and their knowledge (Morphy 1991, Johnson 2001:40, Dussart 1999).

The collective projects are also a statement of the cultural richness and complexity of the Aboriginal heritage, not only in the sense of the Dreaming tradition but also in relation to the political and social traditional structures of the Central Desert

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<sup>5</sup> Myers (1991:33) mentions the following testimony of an Aboriginal painter, Rita Nungala, quoted by Kent S. (1987 A burst of colour in the Western Desert. Sydney Morning Herald, 11 July:48): "(...) I show the young fellas what we Aboriginal people can do for ourselves". The quotation asserts the proud for Aboriginal inheritance and the desire to transmit it to the young generations.

communities (i.e. the system of restricted knowledge (Morphy 1991) or the relationship with the land (Myers 2002, Bird 1992).

These consequences on the social level are strongly related to those on the *cultural* level. Many interpretations of the new acrylic works read them as a *renaissance* of Aboriginal culture(s) in a growing context of “*disculturation*” (Johnson 2000:219) in the Desert region. This situation threatened to blend all the cultural diversity of Aboriginal Desert groups into a unique regional culture (Johnson 2000, Stanton 2000). The interpretation of the artistic practice as a cultural *renaissance* proposes that thanks to the works’ success the situation of “*disculturation*” could be superseded in favour of a new cultural reality. The new approach gathers the desert communities together in what has been called a “multitribal network” (McLean 2002). In my opinion, under this term each community expresses its richness and singularities through variations in a unique and common artistic style frame. This artistic style is based on the traditional system of representation and enables cultural expression on two levels. On a regional level, it allows an expression of the whole of the Central Desert region through the use of a distinctive and common style. On a local level, it permits the expression of the richness of each community through artistic variations in the common style. Those variations are possible thanks to the inner malleability of the “geometric system of representation” (Morphy 1980, 1999). The new interpretation of the cultural Desert reality through the “multitribal network” term is enriching because it abandons the old idea of the Central Desert region as a single cultural block without singularities (Stanton 2000:194). In consequence, the success of the acrylic works helped change western ideas about Aboriginal groups as monolithic and static societies.

### **Analysis of the discourse in an (inter)national context.**

From my point of view increasing artistic success of acrylic paintings on canvas of the Central Desert has contributed to the visibility of Aboriginal culture(s) and identity in the (inter)national arena. The prices these works reach at auctions, the importance of the collections that include them in (inter)national museums and galleries, the growing market of e-commerce, the works sold in the *souvenir* market and the catalogues from exhibitions around the world help to spread knowledge about Aboriginal tradition and contemporary reality. This artistic success is also a recognition of Aboriginal identity in the western world which helps to reinforce the links with the Aboriginal inheritance.

Another important goal of the artistic success in the (inter)national arena is the revival in the 20th century debate on the reception of this kind of Indigenous art. *Grosso modo*, almost every interpretation raised by Acrylic painting on canvas, since its beginning in the 70s, clearly comes from one of these fields: cultural anthropology or art criticism. These two academic fields focused on different features of the artistic phenomenon. The former evaluates the importance of the “ethnographic context”. That means the role of contemporary artistic activity within its social and religious context. The latter, art criticism, focuses on the “aesthetic context” (Benjamin 2000), and therefore criteria have more to do with form and the ontological structure (Burns Coleman 2004) of the works. From my point of view, this debate is enriching since it opens a space of cross-cultural dialogue that reveals Aboriginal identity and culture(s) to the so called West.

## **Critical approach to the discourse.**

Although most of the consequences of the artistic success mark an optimistic link with a contemporary reassertion and understanding of Aboriginal identity in the Central region, it is important to stress different critical points related to the interpretative discourse of the works and the whole phenomenon.

In my opinion, the most important point is to keep the dialogue going with all Indigenous parties involved. Nowadays, as noted, discourses basically arise from two disciplines (cultural anthropology and art criticism), both monopolized by Non-Aboriginal researchers. As long as Indigenous people are not being integrated into these dialogues on a daily basis, the so-called "Westernness" will have to face criticism for their colonialist attitude.

Another important critical approach to the reassertion discourse that must be avoided is that which looks at and interprets Central Desert Aboriginal culture(s) and identity only through these kind of successful art works. Rowse already denounced in 1983 –as Fourmille remembers- that this approach lead to a stereotype that refers to Aboriginal culture(s) and their identity as a whole, only seen in relation to the production of this sort of artefacts.

In consequence, this stereotype talks about a delusive and partial cultural Aboriginal reality and identity. "Delusive" and "partial" are used since some of the following issues are involved: a) It presents Aboriginal society as a homogenous one, leaving aside its richness and multicultural complexity –linguistic, artistic, religious or spiritual- among communities, regions, linguistic groups,... (Fourmille 1994); b) It does not take into account other cultural expressions, such as dance, literature, music and so on (Fourmille 1994); c) It does not take into account the rest of spheres that build up an identity – like political structures, religious beliefs, knowledge systems, history, collective memory or genre-age-sex distinctions-. As a result, it turns Aboriginal people into a "domestic or historiographic subject" (Spivak 1989/7, Pratt 1992).

Moreover, this stereotype is completed with interpretations of the acrylic works as evidences of the spirituality and exoticism of Aboriginal people (Myers 1991:35-36, Errington 1998). All those stereotypes facilitate a re-confirmation of the already established western ideas of Aboriginal identity. It is just another way of explaining "the Other" to ourselves, in an incomplete, unreal and pejorative way, which prove that neo-colonial discourses are reinforced again and again.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, I think it is irrevocable that the success of acrylic paintings on canvas and the dot painting movement has become a turning point in the approach to Aboriginal cultural inheritance, both in the communities' productive arena and in the (inter)national context. It is obvious that the artistic success has had a positive effect on the political, economical and socio-cultural spheres in Aboriginal desert groups. This repercussion is strongly linked to the revival or the construction of an Aboriginal contemporary identity in the post-colonial context. In addition, the inner and traditional meaning of most of the

acrylic works of the Central Desert and its success in the (inter)national arena spread knowledge of the Desert Aboriginal reality and identity all over the art world.

These are the reasons why I propose the new artistic practice as a double-edged sword: towards an (inter)national context, but also into the communities' productive context. The success of the acrylic paintings has created a space for interchange within which the collective Aboriginal identity reasserts itself, and out of which this identity is shared and discussed in a space of cross-cultural debate.

Nevertheless, my personal proposal regarding acrylic painting success and Aboriginal identity reassertion discourse is only focused on and only refers to the art of the Central Desert region reality and culture(s). Nowadays, acrylic artistic success is one of the most important fields where Desert Aboriginal identity is being reasserted in the post-colonial context, but, as is observed by Fourmille (1994) and Rowse (1983), it is not the only one.

Finally, as is also emphasized by Henrietta Fourmille (1994), an increasing involvement of Aboriginal theorists in the debate of the reception and interpretation of the acrylic paintings in particular, and of Indigenous art in general, is needed. Moreover, western neo-colonial approaches to the acrylic paintings can only be avoided in a space of equal interchange and participation by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people.

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