



Larger than Life

AFTER AN ARTISTIC CAREER SPANNING SIX DECADES CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI'S LEGACY MAY OUTLAST THAT OF ALL THE CENTRAL DESERT PAINTERS. **SUSAN MCCULLOCH** TRACES HIS CAREER.

The first painting you see when arriving at Alice Springs airport is a large Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri canvas. The multi-faceted, heavily dotted 1991 *Fire Dreaming* (*Warlugolong*) is a classic touchstone of Central Desert dot painting. It also shows some aspects of Possum's art which set it aside from that of his contemporaries. For beneath the patches of dots and lines relating the stories of the ancestors of this site, and the fire itself as an ochre-red encircling line, lie two naturalistic skeletal figures. These are the Tjangala brothers who did not escape the fire's clutches.

Incorporating naturalism with dots and lines is not common in classic Papunya-school paintings post the early 1970s yet it was a theme to which Possum would return in many different forms over almost his entire painting career.

Clifford Possum's artistic journey had started in the mid 1940s when as a young man he carved animals and artefacts for the tourist trade. In the mid 60s he became a woodwork teacher at the Papunya community. Here in the 1970s he was the youngest of the painting men to join teacher Geoffrey Bardon in painting indigenous images in the then new medium of acrylics.

His first painting is the 1972 *Emu Corroboree Man*. It appears in the Art Gallery of South Australia's (AGSA) Clifford Possum survey exhibition curated by Possum's biographer, Vivien Johnson and now touring Australia. With its realistic central figure surrounded by definable objects and abstracted imagery relating stories it typifies works from this nascent movement.

By the end of 1972 however Possum was moving, as were his fellow contemporaries, away from the figurative into the more linear and dotted style. The small highly individual 1972 *Love Story* shows this well. He confidently used oranges, yellows, blacks and browns giving this and works of a similar era an intense luminosity. Others are softer with more restrained colours built from layers of subtly hued dots.

In the late 1970s Possum's work was tending to become more formalised while honing his craftsmanship. However the static quality that this sometimes evoked, evolved soon into large and encyclopedic multi-layered and complex country map paintings relating to his Anmatyerre culture. Sometimes painted with his relative Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, each contains many different stories such as *Fire Dreaming*, *Possum Dreaming*, *Mt Denison Dreaming*, *Napperby Dreaming* and *Wildflower Dreaming*. Visually complex, many had quite experimental imagery and could well have become a confusing jumble of patterns were it not for the strong structural lines holding together disparate elements as firmly as a musical ground base.

Possum was a great storyteller, personally and through his paintings which he was proud to explain to a receptive audience. As Melbourne dealer and friend Peter Los (who knew Possum from the mid 1980s until his death) says, a day with Possum was never predictable or dull.

As Possum's fame spread, his personal life broadened. Since the mid 1980s he had managed the sale of his own paintings, rather than working entirely through the artists co-operative Papunya Tula Ltd, which he had helped establish. Over his life he dealt with hundreds of different dealers and individuals throughout the world.

Demand for his work became huge. And with such success came the problems of both the artist's own over production for ready money and fake paintings – some done by relations or aboriginal friends, others by white copyists. In 2000 Adelaide dealer John O'Loughlin was convicted of faking Possum's paintings.

Possum often described the personal shame and anger at what was done in his name but



He confidently used oranges, yellows, blacks and browns giving this and works of a similar era an intense luminosity.

Opposite: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Honey Ant Ceremony*, 1972. Powder paint on composition board, 100 x 78cm. Elder Wing Centenary Gift of The Foundation 2001, Art Gallery of South Australia. © ESTATE OF CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI. COURTESY: ABORIGINAL ARTIST'S AGENCY.

his resilience, humour, generosity and larger than life persona kept him painting.

Seniority in Aboriginal cultures brings rights to certain types of image making. So as Possum moved into his mid 60s his images became more sparse and pared-back. This is evident in some little-seen line paintings but its most graphic demonstration is through his skeleton figures. Obscured in earlier paintings or seen as sketchy outlines, these became the subject of the entire canvas itself. Boldly painted in white on black they represent the Tjangala brothers who did not escape a bush fire, but to a western audience – and perhaps to Possum himself – these stark skeletons cut to the very heart of death itself.

Even Possum's death in 2002 increased his notoriety with his burial wishes as stated in his will being challenged by members of his family. A Northern Territory court upheld the family's wishes and Possum was buried in country different to that he had specified in his will.

The legacy he left however is vast. "He hardly had time to live his own history before he became a legend and now is well into a mythological status," says Peter Los. "Of all the central desert painters to be remembered in 100 years time, it will be Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri."

Biography:

An Anmatyerre man, Clifford Possum was born around 1932 about 300km west of Alice Springs at Napperby Station. As a child he was saved from malnutrition by the pastor at Hermannsburg Mission, based there and working as a stockman and part time wood carver until moving to Papunya in the mid 1960s. The youngest member of the "Papunya painting men" with teacher Geoffrey Bardon, his work attracted attention from the early 1970s. From the late 1970s he held hundreds of exhibitions and his work sold copiously in Australia and overseas. In 1988 London's Institute of Contemporary Art gave him a solo exhibition and later that year he made the first of what were to become a number of trips internationally, including a 1990 meeting with the Queen.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Emu Corroboree Man*, 1972. Synthetic polymer paint on composition board. 45.8 x 61.5cm. COLLECTION OF LARRY AND SUSAN MAY. © ESTATE OF CLIFFORD POSSUM TJPALTJARRI. COURTESY: ABORIGINAL ARTIST'S AGENCY.



He lived in Alice Springs and interstate extensively. He received an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2002. He died in Alice Springs on 21 June 2002 at the age of around 70.

Where to see the works

The AGSA's survey exhibition currently touring Australia is a good starting point. It is not the definitive retrospective, but the book by Vivien Johnson accompanying the exhibition offers many more illustrations than are in the exhibition.

Possum's work is widely represented in public collections. Major works include the huge *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (with Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri) in the National Gallery of Victoria.

Possum's one-time de facto partner **Milanka Sullivan** has a website artspeak@bigpond.com which offers some interesting insights on Possum's life and works, and displays some images.

Vivien Johnson has written two monographs on Possum – *Craftsman House* 1993 and *AGSA* 2003. Correcting mistakes (such as who was his real father and other key information) has been tackled in the second volume – showing the problems of writing definitively in this area.

Geoffrey Bardon's *Papunya Tula artists of the Western Desert* (McPhee Gribble, 1991) shows Possum's early painting life.

Clifford Possum's life in context at Papunya can be further seen in illustration and text in *Twenty five years and beyond*; *Papunya Tula painting* Flinders Art Museum catalogue 1999 and *Papunya Tula*; *Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000

Prices at auction

Given the huge output of paintings by Possum, sales of his work on the secondary market are relatively rare. The Australian Art Digest (www.aasd.com.au) lists only 77 works sold over the last 10 years ranging from \$1,000 to \$139,250. Key of these were two Sotheby's sales – the 1972 *Love Story* which set a record in 1995 when it sold for \$50,600 and the 1972 *Honey Ant Ceremony* which sold to AGSA in 2001 for \$139,250.

By the start of the new millennium there were a lot of Clifford Possum fakes in circulation. But there are also thousands of genuine paintings. How to tell the difference? Personal study and researching the history of those who sell paintings may be both tortuous and confusing, but it is the only way to train one's eye to judge the authentic.

Highly collectable, Possum's works are of keen interest to a long-standing core group of top collectors. For those who trusted their own judgement, the best time to buy Clifford Possum works was in the wake of the fake scandals of 1999 when prices were depressed. Many of these post 1999 works may have rarely appeared in public or on the secondary market as collectors are not keen to sell.

A check of Australia's private indigenous galleries may turn up some as well as earlier works for sale. Top range works (expect to pay upwards of \$140,000 for early small works) are likely to appear at Sotheby's Aboriginal art auction; with the occasional such work as well as later paintings at all the major auction houses.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri Retrospective is at the National Gallery of Victoria until 3 May 2004, followed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 14 May to 11 July 2004 and then at the Queensland Art Gallery from 7 August to 24 October 2004.

Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerre c.1939-84 with Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerre c.1932-2002 *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming*, 1980. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 207.7 x 670.8 cm. Felton Bequest, 1988. COURTESY AND COLLECTION: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA. © ESTATE OF CLIFFORD POSSUM TJPALTJARRI, ABORIGINAL ARTIST'S AGENCY.

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