

Patterns of History:

The Papunya Tula Art Movement

Chloe Hillary, Secondee Solicitor (Arts Law Centre of Australia), tells the story of Geoffrey Bardon and the Papunya Tula art movement.

It's an exciting time to be an artist in Australia. Promising – the Federal Government has recently announced a new cultural policy set to ramp up funding and support across artistic industries. Hopeful – part of the national cultural policy promises stand-alone legislation to protect Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP). Uncertain – all of the above and the very nature of being an artistic creator.

This tumultuous ride is something artists know well, and something a man named Geoffrey Bardon experienced first-hand. Alongside Aboriginal artists including Old Bert Tjakamarra, Bill Stockman Tjalpatjarri, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Old Mick Tjakamarra and Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Bardon is widely acknowledged as the facilitator of the Papunya Tula arts movement, which started the Western Desert Art movement in the early 1970s. The Papunya Tula Artists cooperative was the first Aboriginal arts centre, the model of which is still used widely in Indigenous communities across Australia today.

Papunya is a small Aboriginal community, about 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. It was one of the last Government settlements in the Australian Government's policy of assimilation. When Geoffrey Bardon arrived there in 1971, it was a melting pot of multiple language groups from around the area. Bardon was a young teacher and he arrived to teach in the government run school. He was an artist himself – a painter, photographer and filmmaker, he arrived with a Combi van full of gear. While he started off teaching the children, his role morphed quickly over his short time there from general teacher, to art teacher at the school, to his role with the men, which in the end was much more than just teacher.

There is evidence that there was already art being created in the area when he arrived.¹ In a review of a 2017 exhibition 'Tjungunutja: from having come together', Finnane talks about the genesis of the Western Desert Art movement, as explained in the exhibition catalogue by the Aboriginal curators, as when the communities of Papunya came together and performed ceremony to demonstrate which group had the strongest culture and law. This was said to lead to them painting, the year before Bardon's arrival.²

However the way Bardon tells it is that there was nothing for the men in the community to do when he arrived. He saw them tracing symbols in the dirt and he would ask them what they were. He would encourage them to draw in their

style, not whiteman's style. One interpretation was that the men in the community were jealous of the work that Bardon was doing with the children: they thought it was their right to paint the stories, not the children's.³

In around June 1971, the painting of murals, including the Honey Ant Mural started at the school. While some reports say that Bardon had encouraged the children to create murals, it was the men in the end who took over the project, which was ultimately painted over by the authorities. After the murals, the men under Bardon's guidance began to paint on a smaller scale. At first, the artists used materials from around the community – leftover paint, pieces of wood. Bardon took some of these early paintings to Alice Springs to sell. Bardon would talk to the artists about the layout and composition of a work in progress and when a work was complete, and deemed satisfactory, he would prepare a sketch that set out the meaning of the story depicted. A room was found for them to use, sometimes referred to as the Great Painting Hall, and the men would come together daily to paint. Bardon acted as an unofficial intermediary at first, encouraging the men to develop the art and then taking them into Alice Springs to sell. He would return with a cheque which he would distribute amongst the artists, fuelling them and others, to create more – and so it went. In August 1971, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's painting, *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo*, *Gulgardi* jointly won the Caltex Golden Jubilee Art Award alongside a European-style painting. Kaapa was the first Aboriginal Australian to win a contemporary art award.

Bardon admitted to 'interfering' with the works of the artists, he referred to it as 'purifying the mythology' or said it was for the purpose of 'spatial organisation'.⁴ He said "I was concerned with the making of paintings with a Western Desert iconography and meaning to the exclusion of whitefella painting conventions, though with an efficient and artistically justified use of space."⁵

The history of the time and the development of the art movement is clouded and contradictory in its detail. Bardon himself was a documenter and he has published several books about his time in the community. He tends to paint the picture one way – against the background of a Government trying to stomp out Aboriginal culture through a policy of assimilation; he fought for the artists and brought their art to the world. While there are certainly elements of truth to that very simplified version of Bardon's perspective, on the other side

- 1 Luke Scholes, 'Unmasked the myth: the emergence of Papunya painting' in John Kean (ed) *tjungunutja – from having come together* (2017, MAAGNT) 127
- 2 Kieran Finnane, 'Papunya painting: Revisting the genesis of the movement' (2017) *Art Monthly Australia*, Issue 298 May 2017
- 3 'Mr Patters', Film Australia Collection (Penny Robins, 2004)
- 4 Scholes, (n 1) 149
- 5 Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya: a place made after the story: the beginnings of the Western Desert painting movement* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2004) 12

there is evidence that there was already an arts movement in the area before Bardon arrived and it was supported, at least in principle, if not in practice, by the Government.⁶

As early as 1955, there was a policy to stop the removal of Aboriginal sacred and ritual objects from the Northern Territory. The *Native and Historical Objects and Areas Preservation Ordinance 1955* required written consent for such objects to be taken from the Territory.⁷

On 23 April 1971, the then Prime Minister William McMahon, said in a speech to the conference of commonwealth and state ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs:

We believe that Aboriginal Australians should be assisted as individuals and, if they wish, as groups to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society with equal access to the rights and opportunities it provides and accepting responsibilities towards it. At the same time, they should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their culture their languages, traditions and arts so that these can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society. My Government's policy will be directed to these ends.⁸

Bardon's disagreements with the authorities at the time were perhaps at a more granular level. He never got along with the officials, a difficulty he put down to his unwillingness to engage in their drinking culture. Although he evidently made enough friends to make the system work for him and the male artists at least for a time.

As part of the Assimilation Policy, in place well before McMahon, the Aboriginal men in the community received a training allowance to perform tasks around the community such as cutting wood.⁹ When Bardon's painting group was in full force, it was detracting from the work of the community. When painting took over and the chores were not being done, this caused tensions with the local officials.

Bardon claims that in January 1972 when he returned from a holiday to Sydney, the head teacher, Fred Friis (one of Bardon's few white allies) had left, and that's when things started to change. Bardon claims that in February 1972 he was accused of trafficking Aboriginal paintings by the deputy superintendent.¹⁰

The group was incorporated on 10 July 1972 as Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd, with three Aboriginal directors and Bardon in a role as artistic director. Only 17 days later he left Papunya.¹¹ The exact reason for his departure is unclear. It appears that at least part of the reason involved a dispute over the distribution of money to artists: Bardon claimed

that the authorities had failed to distribute money to the artists, and the artists seem to have blamed Bardon. There had been an investigation ordered from the Economics and Business Management Department of the Welfare Administration, looking into the operations of the group.¹² There are also subsequent recorded reports of concerns that the paintings that were being produced were not authentic traditional stories.¹³

It's not clear if Bardon intended to return to Papunya when he left in July 1972. In most of his recounts, Bardon simply says that he was ill, and this was the reason he left Papunya. Other reports record it as a nervous breakdown. Once he returned to Sydney, he was admitted to Chelmsford Hospital and underwent "Harry Bailey's notorious deep sleep therapy, a form of 'treatment' for depression that left dozens dead and many others, including Bardon, physically incapacitated for life."¹⁴ Despite his ordeal, Bardon returned to Papunya in 1973 with the assistance of a research grant to confirm findings from a report from 1972.¹⁵

The first meeting of Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd was held on 30 October 1972, and one of the agenda items was to accept Bardon's resignation.¹⁶ The start of the Art Centre was also the end of Bardon. Papunya Tula is still an art centre today. While there was undoubtedly art and storytelling before Bardon arrived in Papunya he helped to make it accessible – he helped with materials and he helped with finding an audience outside of the communities and a way to help that audience understand the stories in the art, at great expense to his personal health and wellbeing. In doing so, he paved the way for the modern concept of art centres, that continues in today's First Nations art scene.

Papunya Tula Artists continues to operate today, and the company is entirely owned and directed by Aboriginal people from the Western Desert and represents around 120 artists predominantly of the Luritja/Pintupi language groups. The art centre is a member of Desart, which is the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Centres and represents 35 independently governed Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres representing 8000 artists. Papunya Tula Artists have led the Western Desert art movement from the desert to the world stage, with artists Tommy Watson and Ningura Napurrula represented in Paris at the *Musée du Quai Branly*.

Chloe Hillary is a Seconded Solicitor at the Arts Law Centre of Australia, seconded to Arts Law with the generous support of the Australian Government Solicitor from February – December 2023.

6 Vivien Johnson, *Once upon a time in Papunya* (UNSW Press, 2010) 138

7 Ibid, 134

8 William McMahon, 'Aboriginal affairs policy – statement by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon William McMahon – to the conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs' (Speech, 23 April 1971) available <<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2408>>

9 Scholes (n 1)

10 Bardon (n 5)

11 Scholes (n 1)

12 Scholes, (n 1) 154

13 Scholes, (n 1) 154

14 Dan Edwards, 'Message Sticks: Breaking the silence', *realtime* (Web page) <<https://www.realtime.org.au/message-sticks-breaking-the-silence/>>

15 Bardon, (n 5) 10

16 Scholes (n 1) 157