Through the cracks: the emergence of Kittey Malarvie

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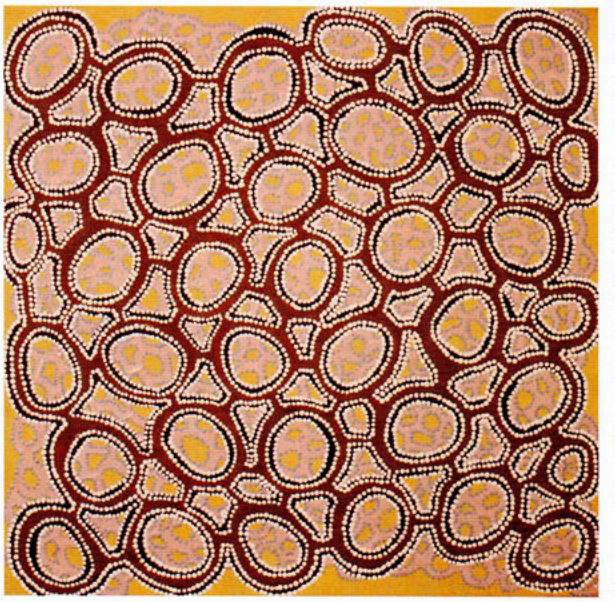
Does 'emerging' hold connotations for Indigenous Australian artists different from those more part of the mainstream? Are the artforms belonging to any so-called 'minority' culture by definition always 'emerging' as seen through the 'dominant' gaze? Can Indigenous Australian artists ever only hope to emerge into the 'big-house' of the broader artworld politic as token 'maids', 'serving tea and biscuits'?[1]

Well, yes and no. On the face of it, funding bodies like the Australia Council apply 'emerging', or more increasingly 'early-career', to artists across the board, such that targeted initiatives like their ArtStart or JUMP Mentoring categories are open to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists alike. Insofar as the rise of the 'emerging artist' category is a symptom of market forces, or marketability (as argued by several authors in this issue), it carries certain implicit career benchmarks which preclude many Indigenous artists working within a community development and cooperative model. Equally, the shifting relevance of key originating aspects of the 'emerging artist' tag (such as 'youth' or 'formal' training) may be seen to be influenced by Indigenous artistic practice. In the inaugural year of the short-lived Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award, hosted by the Queensland Art Gallery, most of the invited finalist artists were middle-aged or older. The oldest finalist, Sally Gabori, was at the time (2006) in her eighties, leading this Award's committee (which 'considered the work of artists of all ages') to explain – 'for cultural reasons Indigenous artists sometimes commence their artistic practice late in life.'[2]



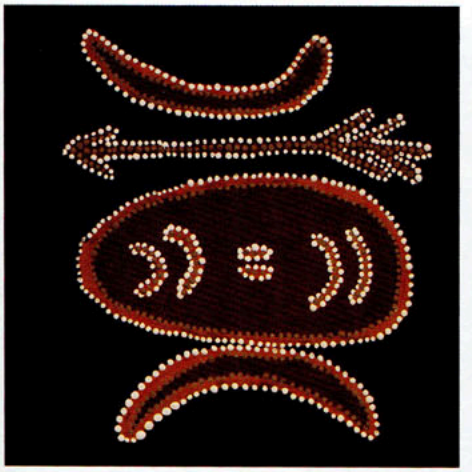
Luga (Cracked Mud), 2011-12, natural ochre and pigment on canvas, 76 x 76cm

This article adopts the 'emerging' label loosely, and with some irony, in considering the work of Jaru Aboriginal artist Kittey Malarvie who, at the age of sixty-eight, has just embarked on her first solo exhibition. Kittey is one of the sixty-odd artists currently working through the Waringarri Aboriginal Arts centre, in the East Kimberley township of Kununurra. Waringarri could itself be seen as an 'emerging', or rather 're-emerging' entity.[3] Though the oldest Indigenous owned art centre in the Kimberley region, established in the early '80s, Waringarri's prominence was to some degree eclipsed by the later establishment (in 1998) of Warmun Arts in the nearby community of Warmun, and by the now defunct Jirrawun Arts enterprise (also established in 1998) at Crocodile Hole, just outside Kununurra. As Waringarri's longstanding arts manager, Cathy Cummins, explains, collectors and curators can sometimes choose to bypass Waringarri if they've already been to Warmun, which is surprising given the obvious differences between work from the two art centres (apart from their common medium of ochre-based paintings) but which may also relate to Waringarri's particular lack of an easily recognisable stylistic 'school'.

Kittey came to live in Kununurra in the '70s, when it was just a burgeoning town, in country belonging to the Miriwoong people. She was born at a goldmine – Brockman, near Hall's Creek (around 360 kilometres south-east of Kununurra), which borders Jaru and Gidja country. Kittey's early life was spent with her family who were variously 'employed' in the region through assisting in gold prospecting and mainly pastoral work – at Sturt Creek Station and later Ord River Station where Kittey had her first job as a housemaid. With the advent of equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers in the late '60s, however, Kittey's family (like many others) were forced out of pastoral work, and made their way to the fringes of Kununurra where they initially set up camp at Lily Creek.

Kittey is not an 'emerging' artist in the conventional sense. She has been making art for an outside audience from the early days of Waringarri – well over the 'emerging' category's requisite first five years of practice. This was a sporadic practice though, and initially founded on her skill in carving boab nuts which she still continues today. Her career as a painter was also initially sporadic, and overshadowed by the two artists whose paintings she began to assist with, namely the late Rover Thomas (c. 1926-1998) and Billy Thomas (b. c. 1920).

Waringarri's earliest records of Kittey's work date from 2006, with one example of these including an



All images this article of work by Kittey Malarvie; images courtesy the artist and Waringarri Arts, Kununurra

left: *Hunting*, natural ochre and pigment on canvas, 10 x 10cm

right: *Carved boab (untitled)*; private collection, Kununurra

'Untitled' work very much in the 'desert' style: four wavy paths meet around a dotted circle which is surrounded by four smaller dotted circles, within a dotted in-fill background. It is a smallish, perhaps unremarkable work but it does reveal compositional strength and a vibrant harmony of colour. Over the next five years, Kittey's paintings traverse a seemingly wide range of subjects with an equal diversity of form, albeit largely within desert iconographic traditions and, until more recently, a fairly classical ochre palette. There is the stark simplicity of *Hunting* (2008): a spear and coolamon flanked by two boomerangs against a black background; the raw immediacy of *Traditional Country* (2008), and equally bold undulating forms of *Untitled* (2008). There are her *jalbarr* (bush tomato) paintings which depict the fruit's ovoid shape and serrated foliage-cap and stem – some comprising this motif alone; others, almost like a botanical study, featuring a more detailed ecology which also includes the tomato's vine and attendant witchetty grubs; and others again in which a mass of tomatoes fills the entire canvas in a mesmerising whorl. Then there is a work like *Love song* (2011), a rare example of human figures in her painting, in which a woman woos a man across vast desert distances with the power of her song.

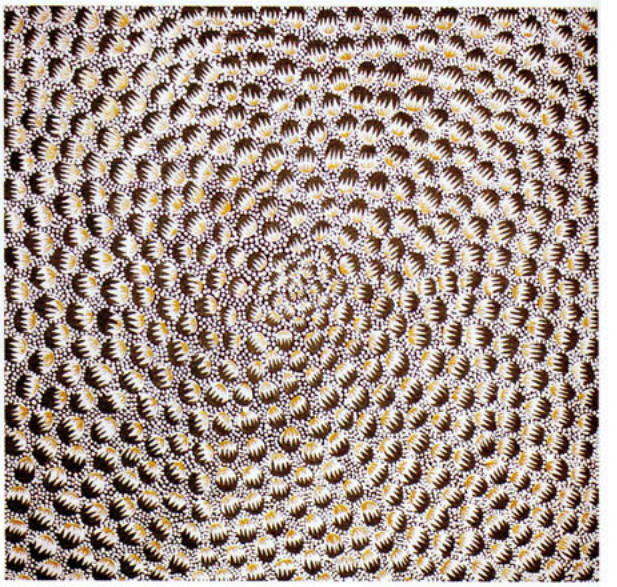
Kittey's approach to this subject-repertoire is wide-ranging with the subjects all relating to aspects of her traditional Jaru country outside Halls Creek, with many works (including the *Untitled* ones) centering on Sturt Creek (also known as Sturt River) in her mother's country. No two works, however, are ever quite the same, or often very similar, even with the same particular subject. Take *Sturt Creek* (2009) and *Sturt Creek* (2011), for example. Both paintings represent a field of arcs (waves) and circles (whirlpools) against black – each a rendition of Sturt Creek during the monsoonal flow when it's more like 'a big, flooding river'. Compositionally, though, they are quite different from each other, with the addition of wavy forms framing the later work as depictions of Wanayarra (the Rainbow Serpent) that resides here – and indication of the site's 'danger', or importance. Kittey recalls an incident at Sturt Creek, with her sister, sighting Wanayarra as it loomed over the trees. She spoke to it in language, of belonging to that country, and it left them alone.

Up until a few years ago, Kittey's output at Waringarri, though less sporadic than earlier years, did not distinguish her as one of the centre's more promising artists. Some of this, I imagine, boils down to the fact of her varying compositions and subjects rather than considerations of artistic merit alone – the market likes an easily discernible and consistent 'style' after all, arguably more so for painters, and more so again for Aboriginal painters drawing on a lived experience of their traditional country. Kittey's emergence at Waringarri, where she is now one of their most prolific painters, has come about due to a number of factors. Foremost, according to Cummins, are the 'cultural reasons', alluded to above. When Kittey's sister passed away (in mid-2011), Kittey's impetus to paint her country seemed to increase, a familial 'passing of the baton'.

Kittey clearly has the artistic nous and motivation to back up any pre-conditions for this emergence. I first encountered her work at Waringarri's stall at last year's Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair where a good number of her paintings dominated part of the hang; they were like nothing else from Waringarri and indeed nothing I had seen before. These paintings belong to a larger, ongoing body of recent work: all are titled *Luga* ('cracked mud') and depict the drying and cracked mud flats along the banks of Sturt Creek. These mud flats were a place of play and imagination for the young Kittey and her kin who'd make mud-cakes from the dried forms, and 'hop-skotch' between the cracks. These paintings, so different to Kittey's earlier representations of Sturt Creek, are a homage to her youth. In a sense, they also act as a kind of homage to her late sister; as Kittey says: 'I like making paintings from my memories from when we were young and all together.'

Again, Kittey's ability to conceptualise diverse variations on this singular *Luga* subject is remarkable, a testament to her individual talent but also, one suspects, to the spiritual potency of the country with which she connects through her paintings. As paintings each work is similarly constructed; a patient layering of circular, looping forms, each layer generally filling the entire canvas to create a dense matrix which pulsates with detail and colour. Indeed the canvas becomes the mud flat– close-up – all its subtle, seasonal changes made manifest.

Girleng (Miriwoong), Jalbarr (Bush tomato), 2011,
natural ochre and pigment on canvas, 60 x 60cm



Girleng (Miriwoong), Jalbarr (Bush tomato), 2011,
natural ochre and pigment on canvas, 76 x 76cm

The white dotting which is often Kittey's last layer for many works in this series, are the salt crystals left on the mud after Sturt Creek/River has run over and the overflow has dried up again. 'Sometimes the old people would eat these cracked mud-cakes as bush medicine for the salt', Kittey explains.

That Kittey would easily slip through the cracks in the broader, dominant artworld is a more likely scenario. As a senior Aboriginal woman, living in Kununurra, she has certainly had the odds stacked against her. It is literally through the cracks, however, with her *Luga* paintings – the serial subject for her first solo exhibition – that Kittey has 'emerged'. These paintings, in many ways oblivious to any goings-on beyond her country, are also Kittey's entrée into a wider cultural and political arena. Does she then emerge into this big house a handmaiden to other people's causes? Does she still serve them 'tea and biscuits', even if only metaphorically? Hardly. It is through her art, and with the steady support of Waringarri, that Kittey's emergence is made fully on her own terms. Here if tea is served it's with mud-cakes, at least Kittey's startling memory of them.

1. Such comments were recently made by Northern Territory CLP Minister for Aboriginal Advancement Alison Anderson, of former Olympian Nova Peris's controversial senate endorsement by Prime Minister Gillard. Anderson's comments were the subject of a '7:30 Report' interview with Leigh Sales, in which Anderson defended her comments as a criticism of the Labor Party rather than of Peris. Notably, the backdrop for Anderson's interview was one of her own paintings; Leigh Sales, 'Nova Peris NT senate nomination divides opinions', *7:30 Report*, ABC TV, Sydney, 24 January 2013.
2. 'The Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Award: Jonathan Jones wins new national Indigenous art award', Media release, Queensland Art Gallery, 7 April 2006; www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/media/archive/archive_2006/xstrata
3. This 're-emergence' is characterised by Waringarri's major capital works developments in 2011, including a purpose-built gallery (complete with new dancing ground), extensions to the studio space, new amenities, and a dedicated museum space. These building projects were accompanied by significant public art commissions involving many of the centre's artists.