“DRAWING ALL THE WAY:”

THE CONFLUENCE OF PERFORMANCE, CULTURAL AUTHORITY AND COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE PAINTING OF ROVER THOMAS

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ABSTRACT

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To date scholarship on Contemporary Australian Aboriginal artist Rover Thomas (c1926 – 1998) has focused on the artist’s sparse, minimalist style so distinct from the *horror vacui* present in much Central and Western Desert painting. Scholars seeking to understand the source of these stylistic differences often describe Thomas as working outside of traditional Aboriginal modes of artistic production. It is my opinion that such characterizations deny the artist’s deep connection to his cultural heritage.

As a solution, this paper problematizes such approaches to Thomas’ artistic practice through careful reexamination of the work in an attempt to identify and define Aboriginally centered cultural and historical influences. In particular, I position the *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle, "discovered" by Thomas, as central to his artistic development. Employing a multi-disciplinary approach which draws from both art history and anthropology, I explore the foundational relationship of his *Gurirr Gurirr* to the development of an aesthetic style, the acquisition of cultural authority (and his subsequent emergence as a painter), and his choice of historical and contemporary subject matter.

It is my contention that “contemporary Aboriginal Art” should be understood as the most recent manifestation of Aboriginal art history, a history in which art produced by Aboriginal artists—as contemporary agents—benefits from analyses within the framework of Aboriginal biographical experience, cosmology and ritual structure, and cultural history—in effect an Aboriginal art history. By analyzing the centrality of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* to the artistic practice of the Rover Thomas, this paper illustrates the
development of a culturally grounded and contextually appropriate framework for the artist’s painting practice.
I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my husband Erik, who supported me each step of the way, and my daughter Maggie, who joined us en route.
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INTRODUCTION

For those new to the subject, there may at first seem to be a contradiction embedded within the label “contemporary Aboriginal art.” On the one hand, “Aboriginal art” is a term couched in numerous expectations and preconceptions relating to issues of authenticity, Aboriginality, and tradition. On the other hand, “contemporary” as a label indicates a level of newness and novelty at odds with longstanding conceptions of non-Western art as founded in ancient or long-standing art traditions. In the Western context, “contemporary” carries with it an additional suggestion of an engagement or dialog with the “post-modern condition” as defined by art historian Jean-François Lyotard (1984). It is my contention that “contemporary Aboriginal Art” should be understood as the most recent manifestation of Aboriginal art history, a history in which art produced by Aboriginal artists—as contemporary agents—benefits from analyses within the framework of Aboriginal biographical experience, cosmology and ritual structure, and cultural history—in effect an Aboriginal art history. Employing this perspective, one will of course encounter colonial agents and the (positive and negative) effects of cross-cultural exchange. But, in an Aboriginal-centered art history, the usual center-periphery relations are reversed, positing the Aboriginal perspective centrally and later "contact cultures” peripherally.

Africanist Henry John Drewal once asserted that “it is only by knowing the specific context of a particular work that we can understand the reasons for certain styles, changes in styles, and choices in imagery” (1990, 87). Toward this end, this paper will examine the work of East Kimberly artist Rover Thomas (c1926 – 1998) in an attempt to identify and define the impact that the confluence of Aboriginal cultural and historical experiences have had on his work. In particular, I will position the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle, "discovered" by Thomas, as
central to his artistic development and practice.\footnote{According to the Aboriginal conception of the \textit{Dreaming} as the source of all creativity, Aboriginal artists do not consider themselves to be the authors of new material, but rather the “discoverers” of previously unknown \textit{Dreamings}. In this vein, Rover Thomas “discovered” the \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} narrative song cycle, the verses of which were given to him through spirit visitations he experienced while dreaming. The resulting \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} balga (or dance cycle) is an Aboriginal song and dance performance that became popular with Aboriginal audiences in the late 70s and holds continued importance for contemporary Aboriginal people especially in the East Kimberley region. The \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} performance features dancers who carry on their shoulders painted boards illustrating key aspects of the narrative. Purchased and resold as art objects, these boards were among the first paintings from the East Kimberley to gain the attention of the international art market. The specific characteristics of the \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} ceremony and \textit{balga}, the larger genre of Aboriginal performance to which it belongs, will be discussed in detail in the “Background Information” section. Aboriginal views on the connection between the \textit{Dreaming} and creativity will be discussed further in Chapter 1.} Using a multi-disciplinary approach, I will explore the foundational relationship of his \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} to the development of Thomas’ aesthetic style, his acquisition of cultural authority (and subsequent emergence as a painter), and his choice of historical and contemporary subject matter.
METHODOLOGY

Previous scholars have attempted to historicize the entrance of Aboriginal art into the Western Art market in the late 20th Century. Principally, Australian art historian Ian A. McLean (2011a; 2011b) has documented the meandering path of critical reception surrounding Aboriginal art since it came to the attention of major Western Art centers in the mid-1980s. Initially lauded for its formal affinities with the Abstract Expressionist impulses so popular at the time, and later derided for its connection with traditionalist influences, by the end of the 1990s the “movement” was considered by many critics—including Rasheed Araeen, the London-based Pakistani conceptual artist and influential editor of the British post-colonial journal *Third Text*—as a cover for the “exploitation and oppression” of the Aboriginal people (McLean 2011b, 148–151). As a solution, McLean echoed critic and co-editor of the *Third Text*, Jean Fisher’s sentiment that Aboriginal art demonstrates its contemporaneity in its boundedness to a worldview (1989 in 2011b, 149). Therefore, according to McLean, a valid Aboriginal Art History requires more knowledge of “the ways in which the artists’ traditional cosmologies, lives and aspirations shaped the art movement” (2011b, 151).

While I generally agree with McLean, and will return to his call for further investigation into the artists’ world views, I am not convinced by his privileging of Western Desert painting as the standout exemplar of a contemporary Aboriginal art and question his linear view of Aboriginal art history. In McLean’s version, contemporary Aboriginal art was born in Papunya

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2 Jean Fisher’s opinion of Aboriginal art was offered in her review of the controversial *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition (1989, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris). The controversy arose over the decision by curator Jean-Hubert Martin to display both Western and non-Western works of art alongside one another on equal footing. Although the exhibition was an attempt to display a body of global art within a post-colonial framework, it was criticized for removing the non-Western objects from their original contexts and meanings. These objects had not been created for display as art in the museum context. Critics felt that the result of this re-contextualization of the objects resulted in a fetishizing of the “otherness” of the non-Western works and ultimately re-enforced traditional Western discourses on art. For a more detailed criticism of the exhibition see: Johanne Lamoureux, “From Form to Platform,” (2005).
Tula, and then other remote Australian communities later joined the movement after witnessing its explosive success (2009, 629–630). This history fails, however, to account for other commercial art activities outside of the Central Desert, such as bark paintings by Yolngu artists in Arnhem Land, women’s batiks produced by Ernabella Design in Utopia, or the watercolor school at Hermannsberg, all of which predate or are contemporary to the emergence of acrylic painting at Papunya (Bell 2002, 98–99). The temporal, geographic, and cultural diversity of these enterprises serves to disrupt the fictive “monopoly” McLean constructs for Papunya Tula (2009, 630). This liberation of Aboriginal art history from the linear model disrupts the damaging misconception that all subsequent regional artistic enterprises are in some way derivative of the Papunya model.

Australian art historian, Darren Jorgenson likewise finds McLean’s linear history of Aboriginal Art problematic. Influenced by the work of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who advocated for a revolutionary view of social change, Jorgenson questions related attempts by art historians Terry Smith and Bernard Smith to “historicize [the aboriginal art explosion] after the fact” (2011, 401). As a replacement for McLean’s linear modernism, Jorgensen offers an Althusserian view of Western Desert painting, in which the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal art “took place in spite of [the colonial] disruption and displacement” and should be studied as a site of “spontaneity that produces history” (2011, 398 & 407, my emphasis).

The problem with Jorgensen’s argument, however, is threefold. First, although he shifts the terms and boundaries of Aboriginal art history from the linear determinability of McLean to consider it as a “properly revolutionary event” which “appeared in excess of its historical conditions,” the history Jorgensen offers as a replacement still fundamentally fails to account for
the diversity of Aboriginal art making practices (2011, 400). Second, it is precisely because of colonial disruption that the need for traditionally ephemeral Aboriginal art in its contemporary (semi-permanent) form emerged. If not for the colonial encounter there may never have been a need for such a transition. Finally, Jorgensen’s statement that “the designs of Aboriginal artists may have body, ground, and rock painting, but may just as well have been invented amidst the chaos of colonization” is problematic (2011, 400). This statement seems to highlight American anthropologist Fred Myers’ concern over the “disjointed relationship between the discourses of the art world and those of Aboriginal producers” (1991, 30). For many Aboriginal artists, the belief in the importance of the continued creation and transmission of sacred designs provides much of the impulse for the work (see Morphy 1998; F. R. Myers 2002; Perkins, West, and Art Gallery of New South Wales 2007).³

As an alternative to McLean and Jorgenson, I am proposing a simultaneously more nebulous and more personal view of contemporary Aboriginal art history, one which accounts for the diversity of contemporary Aboriginal experience and seeks to identify connections—both historical and ongoing—between the vast array of Aboriginal cultural practices, through an approach that owes a great debt to the scholarship of Howard Morphy.

Howard Morphy’s writings on the Yolngu of North Arnhem Land serve as a counterpoint to McLean’s view of the superiority of the Western Desert style (1998; 1991; 1999; 2007). Having dedicated his career to documenting and analyzing Yolngu visual culture and writing from the cross-disciplinary perspective of anthropologist and art historian, Morphy argues for analyses of Yolngu art using methodologies from both disciplines in an effort to place the

³ Although the impulse to share Aboriginal cultural knowledge provides one of the motivations for creating art for global consumption, the amount of information shared generates an issue of continual concern among Aboriginal artists. For more on the degree to which these concerns have shaped artistic practice, see Howard Morphy, Becoming Art (2007) and Fred Myers, “Representing Culture” (2007; 1991).
contemporary Aboriginal artist at the center of any analysis of his/her work. In this vein, I will focus on a single Aboriginal artist, Rover Thomas, and draw, like Morphy, from anthropological and art historical methodologies to apply a cross-disciplinary analysis to achieve a richer understanding of the development of his distinct visual style. In the process, I will interrogate several accepted axioms relating to Thomas’ visual influences, motivations as an artist, and standing within the Aboriginal community at Warmun.

In the first chapter, drawing from the example of Morphy’s methodology, I will investigate the larger cultural context of Thomas’s artistic practice in order to expand upon the limited range of aesthetic influences that have been previously identified. By comparing the public character of the boards painted for the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle with the secretive nature of the ritual designs encoded in Central and Western Desert acrylics, I will shift the discussion from a geographically-based search for prototypes and precedents to a culturally grounded exploration of the relationship between aesthetic forms and communicative functions within contemporary Aboriginal art.

In the second chapter, I will employ a hermeneutic approach to explore the connection between the cultural significance of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle for Aboriginal people living in the East Kimberley region in the early 1980s, and Thomas’ decision to commence painting works for commercial sale. Borrowing from the methods developed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), I will examine Thomas’ popular Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle as a text, and analyze the symbolic structure of the performance, identifying elements which, through their acceptance within the Aboriginal community, enhanced Thomas’ cultural authority. Additionally, grounding Thomas’ artistic practice in a larger field of cultural authority will allow me to problematize the
existing mythology which posits Thomas as an Aboriginal artist whose practice remained outside of "traditional" cultural boundaries (Ryan 1993a, 44).

In the final chapter, I will extend my analysis of Thomas’ artistic practice to examine his decision to paint colonial and contemporary subject matter. Using specific case studies, I will analyze three of Thomas’ paintings, *Ruby Plains Killings 1 & 2* (1990) and *Lake Argyle* (1986), paying specific attention to the relationship between their iconography and subject matter in order to demonstrate that the depiction of such subjects reveals Thomas’ careful consideration of Aboriginal cultural values rather than a subversion of them as has previously been claimed (Art Gallery of Western Australia 1990; Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994; Thomas et al. 2003).

By employing these strategies in analyzing a cross-section of Thomas’ *oeuvre*, I hope to establish the importance of applying a multi-disciplinary analysis in order to achieve a robust understanding of the work of this particular Aboriginal artist. One possible consequence of such an approach would be an increased focus on individual artists or works and less emphasis on the artificial and reductive categorizations of Aboriginal art into regional designations, “schools,” or “movements.”
PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Despite his status as one of the few Aboriginal artists with international name recognition, previous scholarship on Thomas has been surprisingly limited. The exhibition catalog for the Australia Pavilion at the 1990 Venice Biennale is the earliest scholarly work of substance dedicated to the artist. The catalog essay was dedicated to both Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, the first Aboriginal artists to represent the country at this important international art event. Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia to accompany the exhibition, it provides an illuminating insight into non-Aboriginal conceptions of the work at the height of its critical reception in the global art market (1990). The publication was written after the museum had acquired four of Thomas’ works and it is possible to read the catalog as an attempt to connect Thomas’ work to the impulses driving Western modernism.

The content of this essay assumes an overly romantic view of Thomas, his life, and his work. Characteristic passages describe the work as “retaining the freshness and direct inquisitiveness of the challenge of discovery and a focus on a landscape with which he never tires of exploring and extracting new meaning,” and being “imbued with an overpowering sense of compulsion to explore, to experiment, and to incorporate dissonant elements into a cohesive, substantive aesthetic” (1990, 12–13). The brief biographical account presents a decidedly positivistic view of the political climate in Warmun, emphasizing the “mood of cultural regeneration” (1990, 12) and de-emphasizing the sociological and economic challenges of life in the settlement in the 1980s.\(^4\) Despite this tendency toward romanticism, the formal analysis of the work generates insightful and nuanced interpretations of it.

\(^4\) See Chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of life at Warmun in the second half of the 20th Century.
The next substantial publication on Thomas was the catalog essay for *Roads Cross*, a solo exhibition of the artist’s work held at the National Gallery of Australia in 1994. The catalog stands as a valuable scholarly work in that it provides the first (and only that I could find) extended documentation of the song structure of the *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle so integral to much of Thomas’ oeuvre. Additionally, the catalog contains transcripts of the artist’s description of his work as retold to anthropologist Will Christensen and arts manager Mary Macha, as well as two brief but substantive overviews by notable Aboriginal art scholars Wally Caruana and Kim Akerman (1994). What is missing from this otherwise excellent catalog is a substantive analysis of either the formal elements or the iconography of the works in the collection. Using the invaluable documentary information provided, I hope to take a first step toward addressing this omission.

The third and final publication dedicated to Thomas was produced for a 2004 traveling retrospective exhibition entitled *Rover Thomas: I want to paint*, shown serially at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of South Australia, and Art Gallery of Western Australia, and sponsored by The Holmes à Court Collection, a major holder of Thomas' paintings (Thomas et al. 2003). The catalog contains an interview of Mary Macha, the former arts manager for Aboriginal Arts & Crafts Australia Ltd., who was instrumental in promoting Thomas’ works about her experiences working with the artist. This essay, like the Venice Biennale catalog, reveals a careful framing of Thomas’ paintings by Macha as being not just formally but ideologically aligned with the goals of Abstract Expressionism (2003, 47–51). I posit that this effort by Macha was a marketing strategy based on the fact that Macha left her position at Aboriginal Arts Australia in 1983 to work as an independent agent representing Thomas, Jaminji, and other Western Australian artists (Newstead and Australian Art Sales Digest, The
2012). This strategy de-emphasized the Aboriginality of the paintings—that is, the iconographic and biographic content of the work—in order to make them more appealing to Western collectors. As a sales tactic it was very successful; however, as a scholarly treatment of the work, it is highly suspect. It is perhaps this essay that provides the best example of the Western-centric ideology that I hope to counter.

In addition to these three publications, there have been a small but influential number of investigations of contemporary Aboriginal art focusing on the East Kimberley region, which include and are germane to discussions of Thomas. The most notable of these essays were written by Judith Ryan and Will Christensen respectively for the exhibition *Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley* (Ryan, Akerman, and National Gallery of Victoria 1993). Their essays emphasize and problematize the highly complex Aboriginal communities in the region and highlight the diversity of visual languages employed by these artists. Ryan examines the formal differences between Thomas and the Gija artists with whom he worked, citing perspectival differences (the birds-eye-view employed by Thomas as opposed to the lateral perspective favored by Gija artists such as Jack Britten and George Mung Mung) as reflective of larger cultural and aesthetic differences (1993a). It is here that Ryan outlines her conception of Thomas’ artistic style as “looking beneath the surface or skin of the country to the bones” (1993a, 40). In the same catalog, in an essay focused on Thomas’ classificatory uncle and fellow artist Paddy Jaminji, Will Christensen’s article offers valuable documentary information for further analysis of the relationship between the pair and the nature of their collaboration (1993). Because it is a regional study, the catalog, although ripe with valuable documentary information, over emphasizes the unity of artistic production in the Kimberley area and fails to acknowledge that many so called “Kimberley” artists only recently settled in that region. The lack of careful
consideration of Central and Western Desert influences on the formal style employed by Thomas provides further illustration of this deficiency.

The second important work focused on the Kimberley region, and the first scholarly examination of Thomas from outside the discipline of art history, is Erik Kjellgren’s doctoral thesis project entitled “Painting ‘Country’ for Cities: East Kimberley Aboriginal Art in Two Worlds.” The thesis project and a related journal article approach the problem of the Western reception of East Kimberley painting from an anthropological perspective (1999; 2004). Kjellgren focuses upon the “semantic plasticity” of Aboriginal paintings. He engages with the Warmun artistic community as a case study to demonstrate the “diverse meanings and significances” that the artworks assume “as they pass through lives and across cultures” (1999, xi).

Although I agree with many of Kjellgren’s conclusions, he approaches the subject from the perspective of anthropology, and consequently visual analysis remains conspicuously absent from his inquiry. Kjellgren, therefore, seems to embody the deficiency of late 20th century scholarship as lamented by British art historian Nigel Whiteley for its "ocularphobia" (1999, 101). From the essay on Thomas’ work in the Venice Biennale catalog—which provides a prime example of the “series of evaluations that are neither discussed nor explained”—to Kjellgren’s semantic study devoid of precise visual examples, a review of the existing scholarship on Rover Thomas reveals overall a lack of “critical looking” (Whiteley 1999, 102). It seems, then, that there is a lacuna in scholarship surrounding Thomas. It is my hope to begin to address this deficiency by engaging with the process of "critical looking."
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Rover Thomas, born in 1926 at Gunawaggi (Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route) to a Kukatja mother and a Wankajunga father (figure 1), did not start painting until 1982 when he was 60 years old (McLean 2011a, 191). Ten years later, he had become an internationally recognized artist selected as one of the first two Australian Aboriginal artists to represent his country at the 1990 Venice Biennale. Thomas is widely credited with “inventing” the East Kimberley style of painting whose characteristics included “a sparse, condensed iconography” to depict landscape using either lateral or aerial perspective (Ryan 1993b, 3).

During the years between his birth at a remote well in the Great Sandy Desert and his mother’s death when he was ten years old, Thomas lived a traditional bush life, largely removed from exposure to Gadiya influences (Thomas et al. 2003, 65). The death of his mother began a thirty-year period in which Thomas was employed as a stockman in the pastoral industry, an occupation that prevented him from returning to his Country. Although removed from family and Country, Thomas received an Aboriginal education and was initiated into traditional law while at Bililluna Station during World War II (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 4).

5 As noted earlier, the other artist representing Australia in 1990 was urban Aboriginal artist Trevor Nickolls (Art Gallery of Western Australia 1990).
6 This common wisdom that Thomas “invented” the East Kimberley style is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which include the collaborative nature of the Gurirr Gurirr boards and Aboriginal ontological constraints which limit creativity to the sole domain of the Ancestor spirits (both of these issues will be expanded upon later in this paper).
7 Gadiya or Kartiya is the term used for white colonizers in northwest Australia, including the East Kimberley region. For more on terms used by Aboriginal people for settlers see The Habitat of Australia’s Aboriginal Languages: Past, Present and Future (Leitner and Malcolm 2007, 168).
8 The Aboriginal conception of Country encompasses not a specific geographical site or political entity but a specific Ancestral site as well as the Ancestral spirits and Dreaming narratives associated with it. I have chosen to capitalize and italicize the term when referring to the Aboriginal conception of Country in order to make a distinction from the country as it is understood in the Western context. For more on the Aboriginal concept of Country see Fred Myers, Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (1986).
Thomas’ career as a stockman ended as a result of the enactment of the Pastoral Award, also known as the Equal Pay Ruling, which required the (white) ranchers to pay equal wages to white and black stockmen. Although the ruling, established in 1969 by the Australian government, was an attempt to rectify racial injustice and raise the standard of living for Indigenous Peoples, the timing of the ruling was unfortunate as it coincided with a failing cattle market. The unintended effect was that over the next several years there were massive dismissals of thousands of aboriginal stockmen, including Thomas, many of whom had spent their entire lives on the cattle stations and had no other skills or education upon which to rely (Ryan 1993b, 1). As a result in the early 1970s, after nearly forty years of living and working as a stockman, Thomas, now approximately fifty years old, was once again displaced (McLean 2011a, 191). Thomas relocated to the newly established settlement of Warmun near Turkey Creek (Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 63), where he worked odd construction jobs in the growing settlement (Thomas et al. 2003, 58–59).

Beginning in 1975, shortly after moving to Warmun, Thomas experienced a series of dreams that would greatly affect the trajectory of his remaining years. In the dreams, which occurred over the span of several years, a series of songs were revealed to him by the spirit of his recently deceased classificatory mother. The woman had been mortally injured in an automobile accident when the car she was riding in was swept off of a flooded road outside of Turkey Creek earlier that year. Although she survived the initial accident, the woman passed away midflight en route to the hospital in Darwin. The songs given to Thomas by the woman’s spirit are

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9 According to the traditional Aboriginal classificatory kinship system, all female relatives of the mother’s generation are considered “mother” to the self. For this reason the woman in question, although Thomas’ biological aunt, was referred to by him as “mother” according to custom. For more on Aboriginal kin systems see Fred Myers, Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (1986).
10 For a more detailed account of the incident see Will Christensen’s article on Paddy Jaminji and the Guriri Gurirr in the Images of Power exhibition catalog (1993, 32–33).
collectively known as the *Gurirr Gurirr balga*. For Thomas, the reception of this knowledge carried with it the responsibility for maintaining and sharing the story of the woman’s spirit journey with the Aboriginal community through the performance of the *Gurirr Gurirr*.

Thomas’ role in the “discovery” of this *balga*, or dance cycle, can be better understood by pausing to examine the Aboriginal conception of knowledge and creativity. In line with traditional Aboriginal epistemology, all creativity or creation is the specific domain of the ancestral spirits and the *Dreaming*. Because the *Dreaming* is not an historical phenomenon but rather is understood by Aboriginal people as a continual process, people are not empowered to invent knowledge. Instead, “they can be the medium by which existing knowledge is brought to light and given contemporary resonance” (Thomas et al. 2003, 59–60). For an Aboriginal person to claim authorship of a song, story, or ritual performance would be in violation of their central spiritual tenants and any such man-made performance would be viewed in Aboriginal terms as "made-up" or "false."

This is not to say that Aboriginal art forms are culturally stagnant. Clearly they are not. Rather, Aboriginal people believe new material, be it in the form of stories, songs, or imagery, originates from an ancestral source. The new material is then discussed as "found" or "discovered" rather than “composed” or “created.” The *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle’s origin, as

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11 The term *balga*, also sometimes *palga*, is the name for a type of Aboriginal song and dance performance which is open to the public and features a series of songs which are accompanied by clapsticks. A distinctive characteristic of *balga* is that during climactic moments of the performance dancers carry painted boards that illustrate important elements of the narrative.

12 The *Dreaming* is an English name for the Aboriginal system of beliefs and philosophy. Each Aboriginal Language Group has a unique word for the *Dreaming*; in the Gija language the word is *Ngarranggarni*. The *Dreaming* encompasses the time before living memory when the Ancestral beings shaped the landscape, the Ancestors themselves, the stories which record their actions, and the laws for social and moral order which the Ancestors gave to the Aboriginal people.

13 Along these lines, for the artists themselves valued in Aboriginal art is the narrative content or Ancestral meaning. This meaning is communicated but not “created” by the artist (Thomas et al. 2003, 59). Although often the focus of Western scholars, the formal characteristics employed and physical materials used by individual artists in the creation of an art object are secondary to the *Dreaming* expressed. From the Aboriginal perspective, the importance of the meaning or *Country* to the value of a painting is so central that Aboriginal artists will not critique each other’s paintings. Such a critique would be considered an insult to that artists’ *Dreaming*. 
gifted to Thomas via dreams belongs to this existing system of “discovery.” Thomas himself “was always quick to aver that he hadn’t ‘made up’ or composed it; that he wasn’t a ‘liar’; and that the Gurirr Gurirr was ‘true’” (Thomas et al. 2003, 60).

The Gurirr Gurirr narrative opens with a song describing the old woman’s spirit visitation to Thomas through dreams. She tells Thomas that she is going to give him a “corroboree,” the Gurirr Gurirr. The spirit/woman then begins to recount her spirit journey. As it was commonly understood in the Aboriginal community at Warmun at the time, the woman’s spirit had left her body while the plane she was traveling in was flying over Tawurrkurima, a particularly important whirlpool believed to be inhabited by Juntarkal, the rainbow serpent. This spiritually important site then sets the stage for the beginning of an epic narrative that is recounted through song, dance, and imagery in the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle.

Although the specific number of songs performed during the dance cycle varies in relation to the context of the performance, the basic framework and sequence of events remain constant. Beginning at Tawurrkurima, the old woman (in spirit form) travels across the Australian landscape meeting up with a Devil Devil (spirit), encountering the spirits of Aboriginal people massacred by white pastoralists at Mount King during the 1920s, encountering Dreamtime ancestors, and finally arriving at the ritually important site of Kununurra in time to

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14 The physical act of dreaming is a common mode of song reception among Aboriginal people. Marett and Barwick have documented the dreamt origin of important ritual songs among women of the Dappangarti skin group. Additionally, akwelye, wangga, and junba song cycles have all been documented as being “discovered” through the act of dreaming (Marett and Barwick 2003, 144–147; Turpin 2007, 103; Trellyn 2003, 218). Trellyn’s research links the dream-based junba to a diverse array of Aboriginal language groups, including Unjumi, Bunuba, Guniyandi, Gija, Wurla, Miriwung, Ungarinyin, Worrorra, Wunambal, Gambere, Miwa and Gwini (Trellyn 2003).

15 The term “corroboree” is a term coined by white settlers to describe Aboriginal song and dance performances. Today the term is used in northwest Australia to describe theatrical performances and distinguish them from sacred ceremony. As an open (or public) dance cycle, a balga is one possible type of corroboree. In this article I have chosen to avoid the term corroboree in favor of the more accurate balga or dance cycle in respect to (of?) the colonial history of “corroboree.” Exceptions to this have been made when the artist himself used “corroboree” in interviews or transcribed explanations of his work.
watch the historic destruction of the city of Darwin by the monumental storm known as Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Eve 1974.\footnote{For a program of the most commonly performed songs, their lyrics, and translations see the Roads Cross exhibition catalog (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 25–27).}

The *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle can best be characterized as a *balga*,\footnote{Alternatively called *junba* in some Aboriginal languages (Treloyn 2003, 219).} or narrative dance cycle (Akerman 1979). These performances, which are fundamentally distinct from initiation rites and other ritual ceremonies, are a particular feature of Aboriginal social life in the Kimberley region and can be likened to popular entertainment (Thomas et al. 2003, 59). *Balga*, like many Aboriginal performances, are multi-media productions including dance, vocal arrangements, rhythmic percussion, and the display and manipulation of visual imagery (Walsh 2007, 137). The boards used in the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* seem to be representative of the genre. They are large (between 60 and 90 cm in length), rectangular, and repurposed from whatever unused building materials are available (Masonite, plywood, composition board and even cardboard have been used) (Christensen 1993, 33; Ryan 1993a, 45). Fundamental characteristics shared by *balga* include the open nature of the performance, use of stick percussion and hand-clapping as instrumentation, variability of the number of songs, dreamt origin of the songs by a ritual owner, and a repetitive song structure (Treloyn 2003, 209). The open nature of the performance indicates that no limits are placed on who may attend the dance cycle. Unlike many Aboriginal songs and dances that are performed within a ritual context, the material (knowledge) contained in *balga* is considered safe for public consumption. Although the content of *balga* is not secretive or sacred in nature, it would be a mistake to assume that customary ownership structures do not apply. As the dreamer or “discoverer” of the *Gurirr Gurirr* performance cycle,
Thomas became its primary owner and was afforded exclusive privilege in regards to its performance.\textsuperscript{18}

As Judith Ryan has noted, because Thomas was one of the first commercially successful artists from the region, “the communal basis of [the Gurirr Gurirr] and of bi-cultural education in Warmun, has tended to be underplayed” in favor of an emphasis that highlights Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji (1993a, 43). It should be understood that Thomas was one of a group of senior men and women who painted boards for Gurirr Gurirr performances and who together formed the growing commercial art enterprise at Warmun. In addition to creating works for sale, the group painted boards for use in public ceremonies, including but not limited to the Gurirr Gurirr balga (Ryan 1993a, 43). As Ryan notes, the activities of this group, although largely outside the scope of this paper, have been little studied and are ripe for further investigation.

As he gained success and confidence as a painter, Thomas moved away from depicting the Gurirr Gurirr in his later work, addressing instead a range of subjects including Dreaming stories, colonial histories, and contemporary events. Despite this expansion beyond the Gurirr Gurirr, the “discovery” and subsequent popularity of the dance cycle was central to Thomas’ emergence as a commercial artist and is the key to understanding his particular “minimalist” aesthetic.

\textsuperscript{18} Ownership of dreamt ceremonies is conferred in a process that is both genealogical and culturally negotiated, similar to the manner in which ownership of Dreaming sites is passed down. After Thomas’ death in 1998, ownership of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle passed briefly to Tiger Moore and now resides with Thomas’ daughter, Jane Tinmarie-Yalunga (Cunningham 2012).
CHAPTER I. PERFORMATIVE ORIGINS OF ROVER THOMAS’ MINIMALIST AESTHETIC

One approach to understanding the paintings of Rover Thomas is to consider them as performative texts that act as both an extension and a translation of ritual song and dance cycles into a visual media format. It is my opinion that this connection between performance and painting serves as the touchstone for examining an important and under-examined facet of Thomas’ work: the origins of the artist’s “minimalist” style. Given Thomas’ status as the “finder” of the Gurirr Gurirr balga, and the importance of the Gurirr Gurirr to the Aboriginal community, I feel that this focus on performance is especially appropriate and is therefore central to Thomas’ oeuvre.

The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin (1983), painted on composition board using natural ochers and binders, demonstrates the “minimalist” imagery created for use in the Gurirr Gurirr balga (Figure 2). The final, climactic moment of destruction imposed by Cyclone Tracy on the city of Darwin is the subject of the work. The storm, rendered iconographically as an inverted u-shaped biomorph with a central circular bulge, is featured centrally on a vertically oriented canvas. Distinct white dotting is used to mark the boundary between the black form of the cyclone and a roughly applied brown background.

Thomas’ The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin can be compared to Ngumurli Warra (Cyclone Tracy) by Paddy Jaminji. Created the same year, it employs a nearly identical

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19 Throughout this section I have chosen to use quotes around minimalist and minimalism in order to emphasize my use of the terms as descriptors of the formal qualities of Thomas’ work, which are none the less richly imbedded with content and meaning. I in no way wish to connect the “minimalism” in Rover Thomas’ work with the minimalist impulse of American post-war Modernism.

20 At the time of its “discovery” and subsequent performance, the Aboriginal community at Warmun, like many others in the East Kimberly region, was in a period of crisis. The Gurirr Gurirr balga appealed to a populace grappling with increasing social tensions brought about by lack of access to Country and the corrupting influence of drugs and alcohol. This situation and its connection to the popularity of the Gurirr Gurirr balga will be examined further in Chapter 2.
minimalistic tricolor composition (Figure 4). Distinctive white dotting is used to mark the outline of the figures, and again we see a roughly textured but tonally flat treatment of positive and negative space. The close correlation between the two boards painted for use in the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle, one by Thomas the other by Jaminji, is not surprising as the collaboration between the two artists has been well documented. Another example of the close correlation in subject matter, stylistic treatment, and composition can be found by comparing the works Cloud, Krill Krill Ceremony (1984) and Kukatja/Cloud, Krill Krill Ceremony (1984) by Jaminji and Thomas respectively (Figures 5 and 6). The Gurirr Gurirr images then can be understood as quasi-iconic. By working together, Jaminji and Thomas—who share an uncle/nephew classificatory relationship and who also may have been acting within recognized owner and manager roles—seem to have developed some agreed upon visual conventions for the images they painted for use in the dance cycle. These conventions include the restricted use of dotting, straight-forward compositional arrangement on a flat ground, and standardized iconographical vocabulary.

Paddy Jaminji, not Thomas, was the first artist to create boards for performances of the Gurirr Gurirr balga. Jaminji, Thomas’ classificatory uncle (and the classificatory brother of the deceased) created the boards under the direction of Thomas (Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 65). This division of labor parallels Aboriginal preparations for ritual in which the “owner” of a particular ritual collaborates with a “ritual manager” (usually a classificatory kin) to produce ground and body paintings and ready the site for ceremony. According to Mary Macha, Paddy Jaminji was the only person living at Warmun who was carving artifacts for the tourist market when she began to visit the community in the early 1970s. She has hypothesized that his reputation as an “artist” may also have been a factor in his selection as a collaborator by Thomas (Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 65). Additionally, as one of the founders of the community of Turkey Creek, Jaminji had considerable status as an Elder in the community (Christensen 1993, 35). For more on the “owner”/ “manager” relationship see Fred Myers’ Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (Myers 1986).

In deference to the close nature of this collaboration, a set of Gurirr Gurirr boards owned by the National Gallery in Canberra is jointly attributed to both artists. For more on this collaboration see: Art Gallery of Western Australia 1990; Ryan, Akerman, and National Gallery of Victoria 1993; Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994; Thomas et al. 2003.

Krill Krill is an alternative spelling of Gurirr Gurirr.

A third example of the type is held in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. It is a well-worn board painted by Paddy Jaminji and is notable since the central biomorphic hump has been inverted and enlarged suggesting that Jaminji felt a fair degree of freedom within the conventions of Gurirr Gurirr imagery. Refer to the Images of Power exhibition catalog (Ryan, Akerman, and National Gallery of Victoria 1993, 38).
These “minimalist” compositions, created first in collaboration with Paddy Jaminji and later by Thomas and Jaminji individually, provide an opportunity to investigate the nature of this collaboration between two artists with an eye to interrogating to what degree Thomas shaped the visual style of the works. In his essay for the *Roads Cross* (1994) exhibition, Wally Caruana has linked the East Kimberley “minimalist” style to rock and body art traditions of the region (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 3). Although the existence of geographical and cultural distinctions between Central Desert and East Kimberley aesthetic traditions are supported by an examination of pre-contact rock art traditions, it would seem unwise to limit a search for aesthetic precedents to local art traditions alone. Additionally, such an approach seems to privilege the role of Jaminji (a Gija person with historical ties to the region) over Thomas (whose language groups, Kukatja and Wangkajunga, were traditionally based south of the region) in determining the aesthetic nature of the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards (figure 7).

If Thomas assumed a more vocal role in the collaboration than has been assumed previously (a view that would be in line with the owner/manager relationship as set out by Fred Myers), then the issue of stylistic origins may be more complicated than has been previously considered. Based on his birth *Country* and traditional affiliations, Thomas can claim aesthetic connections to the artistic community at Balgo (where there is a concentration of Kukatja painters) as well as the artistic communities at Kintore and Kiwirrkurra (Brody and Holmes à

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26 Myers documents the division of ritual rights into a reciprocal binary of “owner” and “worker” among the Pintupi and Warlpiri peoples. The “worker”/”owner” system operates according to an established pairing of equal but distinct rights and obligations for ritual performance (1986, 147–149).
Court Collection 1997, 66).\textsuperscript{27} Kukatja painters from these communities share an iconographical language with the Pintupi, both using a graphic language of representational symbols such as circles (camps or waterholes) and u-shapes (sitting figures) in their compositions.

Visual differences between Western Desert art and the \textit{Gurirr Gurirr} boards include the medium, the use of representational figures,\textsuperscript{28} the amount of dotting employed, and the overall complexity of the composition of the images. While these differences are usually discussed in relation to the geographical distances between the artists who produce them, I would like to offer an alternate explanation based on the functional differences between the images and Aboriginal concerns regarding access to knowledge (Ryan 1993a). Much of what eventually became the Papunya Tula or Western Desert aesthetic evolved as a means of distancing paintings created for commercial sale from ritual designs that are highly secretive in nature. British anthropologist and journalist Victoria Finlay explains that use of acrylic rather than ochre paints was a strategy employed by the Pintupi artists painting at Papunya Tula to reduce the potential danger the works presented to uninitiated viewers and to the community itself because “the materials themselves were not sacred but only represented sacred colours—like a mirror” (2002, 71).\textsuperscript{29} As the Western Desert art movement progressed, the artists developed a number of strategies of mediating cultural concerns over the danger of revealing too much secret information to cultural outsiders. Principal among these was the practice of masking sacred content by dotting over

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\textsuperscript{27} Kukatja peoples’ traditional lands are located in close proximity to Pintupi \textit{Country} and the two language groups share a common visual culture. The links between Kukatja, Warlpiri, Pintupi, and Ngardi visual cultures have been well documented by Judith Ryan (1993c, 86–88).

\textsuperscript{28} Geoff Bardon has admitted that when, in his role as art advisor at Papunya, he commented on some representational forms in early Papunya works, they were painted out. It is ironic that while at the time such representational elements were considered markers of modern influence, today the lack of such figural elements has been cited as evidence of traditional regional differences (Michaels 1993, 56).

\textsuperscript{29} Sharing inappropriate knowledge could potentially result in offenses to either the Ancestral beings themselves or to other members of the Aboriginal community. Offending the community could result in physical violence or diminished status in the community, while Ancestral beings might retaliate by causing illness or natural disaster. For more on this topic see Fred Myers’ \textit{Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self} (1986).
secret elements. This resulted in a more complex composition which obscured the sacred content and increased emphasis on pattern and design (Caruana 2003, 114–116).

The apprehension felt by the Pintupi artists working at Papunya over how much sacred knowledge to reveal was not shared by Thomas and Jaminji, who were working within the context of *balga*, a performance genre which is, by definition, open and available to a broad audience. While Western Desert painters were consciously obscuring the secret meanings of their images, Thomas and Jaminji would have had an opposite concern, that is, that the images painted on the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards be as iconographically clear as possible. To be effective elements in the larger performance, the boards needed to be easily understood, and understood while in motion and from a distance. Additionally, considering the multicultural makeup of many of the East Kimberley communities where the *Gurirr Gurirr* was performed, Thomas and Jaminji would have been aware that the images they selected needed to be understandable to a pan-Aboriginal audience. For these reasons, it is not difficult to understand why they would have tended toward large, clearly defined forms.

*Balga* performances from the East Kimberley are not the only genre of Aboriginal performance to employ painted boards as props. An analysis of ceremonial dance boards created by Warlpiri artist Emma Daniel Nungarayi suggests a differentiation in the visual properties of the works, which parallels the shift between performative and commercial functionality in Western Desert art (Figure 8). The dance boards in the Australian Museum collection were created by Nungarayi in the 1970s-1980s and used in women’s ritual performances. Nungarayi’s boards, created for sacred rather than secular performances, are oblong ovals as opposed to the

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30 Linguist Frances Kofoed has documented the diversity of languages active in the Kimberley region. In addition to the five language families (each comprising several similar languages or dialects) which existed when Europeans arrived in the Kimberley in the 19th Century, today a number of languages from outside the region are spoken by groups who have moved into the area. Finally, a new language: Kriol, the “lingua franca of the area” has developed over the past hundred years through the blending of English and traditional languages (1993, 6–9).
large rectangular boards favored in *bagla*. They feature a restricted ochre palette and straightforward composition of a linear arrangement of circles, half-circles, and slashes. The boards utilize the familiar Central Desert iconography of half circles and slashes, yet lack the all-over dotting and compositional complexity characteristic of the contemporary acrylic paintings. Like the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards, the simplified formal elements of the imagery on Nungarayi’s dance boards reflect their communicative and performative purpose as well as their functional rather than commercial origin. These similarities, especially when considered in the context of Aboriginal concerns about insider and outsider knowledge, suggest the possibility of reading the style of the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards as related to the public nature and performative function of the work rather than inherent regional aesthetic distinctions.

If, as I have hypothesized, the simple, direct compositional style of Thomas' *Gurirr Gurirr* boards is related to their communicative function within the larger *Gurirr Gurirr* performance, then a move toward complexity should be evident in works by Thomas that are related to, but not painted for, that same performance. Careful comparison of *The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin* (1983) and *Cyclone Tracy* (1991), the former painted for use in the performance of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* and the latter a more mature work related to but independent of the dance cycle, will aid this investigation (Figures 2 and 4). Representing connected but distinct moments in the artist’s career, these paintings illustrate the compositional and iconographical adaptations employed by Thomas as his images transitioned from elements of a larger performance into independent artistic statements.

There are marked formal differences between *The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin* and *Cyclone Tracy*. Painted approximately a decade apart, Thomas created the earlier *Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin* for use in the performance of the *Gurirr Gurirr* for an Aboriginal
audience. It is appropriately “minimalist” in figural content because in a performance context, imagery is augmented by vocal and rhythmic patterning, lyrical content, and movement, all of which function additively to express the climactic moment. On the gallery wall, the symmetrical figure in *Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin* appears far too static for a depiction of the power of the legendary cyclone. Yet, imagine for a moment the large vertical board (over 100 cm in height) balanced on the shoulders of a performer, flashing in and out of view as he contorts his body to the rhythm of the dance.

Formally, the later (and much larger) *Cyclone Tracy* is a more developed composition. Here the central bimorph is set against an aggressive pattern of red and umber serpentine stripes, each differentiated—like the central figure—by the distinctive dotted line. Even the dotting becomes more involved; in *Cyclone Tracy*, Thomas variously used white and mustard hues rather than limiting his palette to the more traditional white, adding another level of complexity to the image.

The fundamental change that had occurred in the decade between the two works is the “discovery” of Thomas by the Gadiya world through art promoter Mary Macha. This change, which resulted in a shift in Thomas painting for external rather than Aboriginal audiences, is the key to understanding the development of compositional sophistication in works painted for commercial sale. Thinking about this contextual shift, I believe that the dynamic composition of *Cyclone Tracy* may be part of a larger aesthetic development that aimed to invest the commercial image with the performative elements that are lost in the transition from performance space to gallery.

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31 On Christmas Eve 1974, Cyclone Tracy struck the city of Darwin. The widespread destruction imparted by the storm left 71 people dead and 41,000 of the city’s 47,000 inhabitants homeless. The category four cyclone remains the most compact and one of the most destructive cyclones on record in the Australian basin (Australian Emergency Management Institute. 2013).
A similar iconographic shift parallels this trend toward compositional complexity. In Thomas’ own words the iconography of the storm on the *Gurirr Gurirr* board depicts the path of the cyclone from an aerial perspective, “wind blow in from here—city part—wind come around from seas, went back again” (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 60). Thus the image can be considered akin to an aerial map with Darwin identified as the roundish bulge at the top of the arc depicting the path of the destruction. In contrast, the later work presents a more complex perspective of the storm, simultaneously representing the geographical direction and physical magnitude of the cyclone. Additionally, Thomas no longer finds it sufficient to limit his composition to the cyclone alone, including the winds that fed the weather system as well as the dramatic red dust created by the massive winds (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 60). In *The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin* we, the viewers, remain safely outside the action which is contained within the edges of the canvas. In contrast, through his use of strong verticals representing winds and red dust feeding the storm and by expanding the image to the edges of the painting surface of his later work, *Cyclone Tracey*, Thomas has created the illusion of the figure about to burst forth, threatening to envelop us inside the storm.

Looking at the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards in the context of their use in performance of *balga* opens up a new consideration of the origins of East Kimberley art as possibly less related to cultural and aesthetic differences between Kimberley region and Western Desert peoples and more connected to cultural concerns about the transference of knowledge. By linking the boards to visual materials created for use in Western Desert ceremonial activities, I hope to have offered an alternative to the division of Aboriginal art into overused (and over simplified) geographical designations. While I am not negating the presence of regional affinities and influences, I posit
that a more nuanced and culturally appropriate reading of the works may be reached by considering the communicative and functional properties of the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards.

Developing on this new understanding allows us to question the common mythology constructed around Rover Thomas. Popular axioms that Thomas was “an artist who simply loved to paint”, whose works showed “little evidence of the strictures of traditional aesthetic parameters”, and ultimately “create[ed] a highly individual synthesis that is rare in the work of ‘bush’ artists” require careful reconsideration (Thomas et al. 2003, 45; Art Gallery of Western Australia 1990, 13; Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 66). Given Thomas’ vocal concerns that *Gadiya* audiences acknowledge the *Dreaming* origin of the *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle (as discussed earlier), it is possible that he may have been much more attentive to Aboriginal conceptions of authority than has been previously recognized. A reevaluation of the social context of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga*, its reception among Aboriginal peoples, and its role in Thomas’ work provides an alternative picture of Thomas’ emergence as an Aboriginal painter bounded by, rather than defiant of, Aboriginal cultural conventions.
CHAPTER II. CULTURAL AUTHORITY AND THE DECISION TO PAINT

By examining the cultural context of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle in particular and balga in general it is possible to reach a deeper understanding of Thomas’ work and its place in the Aboriginal community. As a Kukatja man living over 500 kilometers from the Country of his birth, the process of “discovering” and sharing the Gurirr Gurirr provided Thomas a pathway to acquisition of cultural authority. Although Aboriginal artist and curator Avril Quaill noted the importance of the Gurirr Gurirr in Thomas’ ability to “establish ceremonial links to Country,” a thorough investigation of the connection between the popularity of the dance cycle and Thomas’ acquisition of cultural authority has yet to be completed (National Gallery of Australia and Quaill 1997, 91). In the following section a deeper examination of Aboriginal conceptions of cultural authority and the negotiated nature of its acquisition will attempt to resolve unanswered questions about the timing of Thomas’ entry into the commercial art market.

When anthropologist Will Christenson stated that “external interest in Paddy [Jaminji]’s work spurred Rover to produce his own Gurirr Gurirr paintings…” he was restating the dominate view that Thomas’ decision to begin painting in 1981 was directly motivated by an interest in (and perhaps even jealousy of) successful efforts to sell Jaminji’s paintings to Gadiya buyers. Australian curator Ann Marie Brody expands on this connection, claiming that “where the only income was social security, or ‘sit down’ money, the prospect of being able to earn money from painting was especially attractive” (1997, 65). I believe that this explanation is

32 In Aboriginal communities status is gained through the acquisition of knowledge, participation in ceremonial activities, and maintenance of ritual obligations to genealogically inherited Country. Traditionally, ownership of Country is culturally determined through a process of negotiation which considers both inherited and earned claims to specific Dreaming sites. Generally speaking, the farther removed one is from a site, the more tenuous the claim of ownership, a factor which makes maintaining connections to Country particularly difficult for Aboriginal people like Thomas who live at great distances from the Country of their birth. Because ownership or the permission of the customary owner is a requirement for an Aboriginal person to paint a particular subject, the issue is of primary concern to Aboriginal artists. For more on the culturally negotiated nature of Aboriginal ownership see Fred Myers’ Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self (1986).
overly reductive and fails to account for the nuances of Aboriginal conceptions of property, ownership, and authority.

Although Mary Macha purchased boards from early Gurirr Gurirr performances from Jaminji and not Thomas, it is possible that Thomas received a share of the income from the sale. As the primary owner of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle, Thomas would have had a claim to a portion of any income earned through the sale of paintings based on its subject. The sentiment that the “owner” as much as the painter has a claim on profit received for the sale of a painting derives from a cultural divide between Western and Aboriginal views of where the value of a painting resides. While non-Aboriginal buyers think that they are buying an image, the Aboriginal viewpoint is that what is purchased through the sale of a painting is knowledge, specifically knowledge of a certain Country and the Dreaming stories that are associated with it (Kjellgren 2004, 158). This debt of “ownership” was recognized by others in the community at the time, including Don McLeod, Thomas’ brother-in-law, who advised Mary Macha that she should have been paying Thomas as he “had the Dreaming” (Thomas et al. 2003, 48).

If, as I argue here, Thomas did not take up painting for entirely economic motivations, a closer analysis of Aboriginal systems of cultural authority, the importance of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle for Aboriginal peoples at the time, and Thomas’ relationship to it may provide an alternative theory for his decision to create paintings for commercial sale. To this end, I propose that Thomas emerged as a painter in relation to his rising status as a cultural authority within Warmun and the larger Aboriginal community brought on by the popularity of the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle.

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33 Aboriginal economic culture employs the principal of reciprocity. In this process, described by Nicolas Peterson as demand-sharing, resources are allocated through complex networks of obligation (Peterson 1993). Because Thomas owned the Gurirr Gurirr balga, he could have demanded a portion of the profits from any images depicting the narrative. That these particular boards were used in performances would have only strengthened his claim. For more on demand-sharing in contemporary Australian Aboriginal communities see Yasmine Mashuarbash, Yuendumu Everyday (2008).
dance cycle. Evidence of this can be seen in Thomas’ own statements during interviews. When
Thomas discussed his success, his comments demonstrate a prioritizing of the success of the
balga over the commercial success of his paintings. This can be seen in the following quotation
from the Roads Cross exhibition catalog:

That’s why we got that corroboree now, biggest culture. I can go
anywhere, take this corroboree, [Gurirr Gurirr], I can go Perth,
from there to Melbourne, anywhere. Darwin. I bin take ‘im to
Darwin last year, oh, the year before, year before, y’know.
Yirrkala, Maningrida. And us mob, maybe bin go to Hookers
Creek, long way, Northern Territory, Northern Territory, other side
of Victoria… (1994, 24)

This quote documents the distances that Thomas and his “mob” had traveled for Gurirr Gurirr
performances. As Thomas indicates the balga had become popular outside the Kimberley region
and even been performed in cities including Perth, Melbourne, and Darwin. It seems that the
artist himself saw the performance, not the paintings, as central to his conception of his own
accomplishment. In another interview from 1997, Thomas’ comments suggest less certainty
about the appeal of the images:

Before, no nothing. When that house bin put up in Turkey
Creek, me and Jaminji bin start off. We drawing all the way.
We him know something now. I’m all over now. We him
sending little bit by little bit. And so Gadiya [whitefellas] he
like ‘em me. I don’t know what for.”
(Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 64)

This passage suggests that Thomas appreciated the connection between drawing (or painting)
and his status in the Gadiya art world. But, it is also possible to infer that while the popularity of
the performance was a source of pride for the artist, as was the commercial success of the
paintings, the later remained somewhat inexplicable.

34 Yirrkala and Maningrida are Aboriginal communities located within Arnhem Land where Thomas had gone for
performances of Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle.
The importance of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* to the community of Warmun and the spread of its popularity among Aboriginal people remains central to the discussion of Thomas’ entry into the enterprise of painting “boards” for sale.\(^{35}\) As has been noted by Christensen, the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* was not immediately popular. Several years passed between Thomas’ initial “discovery” of the narrative dance cycle in late 1975 and its first performance, which failed to attract the attention of the entire community at Warmun (Christensen 1993, 33). It was not until the early 1980s that the *balga* was embraced as an important cultural performance.\(^{36}\) Thinking about the component elements of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* as a cultural text, three distinctive features stand out as possible keys to understanding the eventual acceptance of the work for Aboriginal audiences, especially those living in the East Kimberley region during the early 1980s: Thomas’ use of multiple languages in the lyrical structure of the performance, the blending of ancestral, historical, and contemporary time within the narrative structure, and finally the symbolic importance commonly attributed to Cyclone Tracy among Aboriginal people.

The epic geographical scope of the narrative, in which the old woman’s spirit transverses lands belonging to a number of distinct Aboriginal language groups, resulted in songs and verses composed in a number of Aboriginal languages.\(^{37}\) Multi-lingual lyrics are not uncommon in Aboriginal performances, and the languages included in such performances may be unfamiliar to

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\(^{35}\) The first Aboriginal paintings to be embraced by the fine art market were the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards created by Thomas and Jaminji. Because of this, paintings today are still referred to by many East Kimberley artists as “boards”, a reflection of the importance of Thomas and the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* to the artistic movement there (Art Gallery of New South Wales and Perkins 2004, 136).

\(^{36}\) By the early 1980s there is evidence of the participation of Aboriginal people from outside the community of Warmun participating in *Gurirr Gurirr* performances. Christenson has documented participation by members of Guda Guda (Nine Mile), Rugan, the Mandangala, and Woorreranginy (Frog’s Hollow) communities (Christensen 1993, 33).

\(^{37}\) The list of languages connected with the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* includes Ngarinyin, Gija, Worla, and Miriwoong. Thomas was not believed to be a fluent speaker of all of these languages and their presence in the lyrical content of the *balga* is largely considered by Aboriginal people to be evidence of the “truth” of his spirit visitation (Christensen 1993, 33).
the singers, composers, and audiences (Marett and Barwick 2003, 146). This blending of languages within a cohesive performance may have appealed to Aboriginal people living in the region at the time, many of whom were grappling with anxieties surrounding the sharing of scarce resources among historically, culturally, and geographically isolated and often relocated peoples.

In the 1970s, these communities were challenging places in which to live. Many of them were largely inhabited by former pastoral workers who, like Thomas, had settled there after being pushed off the pastoral leases following the passage of the Pastoral Award in 1969. Warmun, for example was land held by the commonwealth, and thus one of the few locations not controlled by pastoral interests. The site of a former post office and an abandoned ration office, Warmun lacked even basic amenities (Christensen 1993, 33). The community did not have access to running water, electricity was very limited, and housing in the community was makeshift. However, coming from the conditions on the pastoral leases, many of Warmun residents were used to similar degrees of material deprivation (Thomas et al. 2003, 58–59).

What was perhaps more challenging for residents of the East Kimberley communities was the cross-cultural cohabitation required by the refugee status of the population. Traditionally cross-cultural interactions among Aboriginal people are governed by a sophisticated set of culturally determined practices in which land rights and the prerogative of land “owners” dictate appropriate behavior. The existence of a large refuge population created a significant disruption of traditional rules governing social interactions. Additionally, a general feeling of longing to

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38 Turpin has documented the phenomena in her studies of Akwelye songs performed by Kaytetye-speaking persons (Turpin 2007, 103).
39 Once they were no longer employed on the pastoral stations, station managers forced former workers and their families off pastoral lands. In the early and mid-seventies thousands of Aboriginal men, women, and children were displaced onto settlements across the Northern Territory (Jebb 2002, 285–290).
40 For more on the Aboriginal conception of “ownership” see Fred Myers’ *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* (1986).
return to *Country* ran parallel to the social tension underlining daily life in the community (Thomas et al. 2003, 58–59). In this context, the multi-lingual dimension of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* can be interpreted as more than an effective narrative device. This mixing of languages, each with its place in the overarching narrative, would have resonated with the multi-lingual population attempting to co-reside at Warmun.  

This is not to say that Thomas consciously composed the songs of the *Gurirr Gurirr* as a political statement, but rather that the multi-lingual facet of the performance may have appealed to local audiences at this time for this reason.

In addition to linguistic and geographic diversity, the *Gurirr Gurirr* narrative featured a temporal bending of ancestral, historical, and contemporary periods. This blending of time, in which the ancestors, spirits from the “Killing Times,” and characters from the contemporary moment all interact, foregrounds the Aboriginal conception of time in which the present, past, and future are not conceptually distinct. According to such a conception of time, the actors of the past are present and alive in the landscape today. For Aboriginal audiences in the early 1980s, the *Gurirr Gurirr* narrative would have been a reminder that the “*Dreaming* continues, and those living today are part of the *Dreaming*, drawing upon and being defined by it” (Thomas et al. 2003, 60–61). Through adroit interweaving of *Dreaming* and of colonial and contemporary temporal perspectives, the *Gurirr Gurirr* provided a model for a way forward that allowed residents to maintain connections with *Dreaming* beliefs and values while simultaneously providing an appropriate means of incorporating their changed living conditions into the

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41 Language Group is the largest social and political designator for Aboriginal people.
42 The term “Killing Times” refers to a period which marks the most brutal phase of the colonial encounter in Australia. During this time pastoralists divided the landscape into separate cattle stations and embarked on an effort to remove Aboriginal people from the region. Incidents of cattle spearing served as justification for the massacre of whole encampments of Aboriginal people who were considered an obstacle to the cattle industry. For more on the history of the period see (Kjellgren 1999, 90–95).
Dreaming narrative. This blending of time stresses the continued importance of the Dreaming to contemporary circumstances, thereby providing a temporal touchstone for a populace geographically cut off from traditional cultural institutions.

In the climax of the Gurirr Gurirr performance cycle the woman’s spirit looks out over Kelly’s Knob in Kununurra across the long distance and serves as witness as the Rainbow Serpent takes the form of Cyclone Tracy to destroy the city of Darwin. This catastrophic event, which occurred on Christmas day, 1974, and which caused widespread flooding across northern Australia, was interpreted by many Aboriginal people as an admonishment for failing to care for Country and the abandonment of traditional beliefs. This connection between the destruction of Darwin and the keeping of Aboriginal Law served as a forceful reminder of what was at stake in maintaining the continuity of Aboriginal tradition.

The importance of the Gurirr Gurirr balga to the Aboriginal communities in East Kimberley can then be understood as appealing to a specific cultural crisis which emerged in the wake of the forced displacement of Aboriginal peoples from their Country and the apparent supernatural destruction of an entire major city, both of which can be interpreted as demonstrating a serious need for reconnecting with the Dreaming through reestablishing lost roots and traditions. The Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle was embraced as a symbol of the essential connections between Aboriginal people and their land and the importance of continued

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43 Thomas was not necessarily radical in this interweaving of temporal layers within the Gurirr Gurirr narrative, and in actuality the Gurirr Gurirr was not the only dance cycle at the time to blend ancestral and contemporary time. Nonetheless, by emphasizing the co-existence of the Dreaming, colonial, and contemporary spheres the Gurirr Gurirr reminded Aboriginal audiences of the universal and timeless nature of the Dreaming. See Marett and Barwick for more on the blending of ancestral and contemporary themes in Aboriginal song (2003, 150).

44 In 1975 Darwin was the largest city in the Northern Territory with approximately 38,000 residents. Although small in comparison to the larger cities in Queensland and New South Wales, for Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory at the time, Darwin was the symbol of white cosmopolitanism in which a high number of Aboriginal people lived and were neglecting their obligations to Country. At the time of the storm, the transmission of traditional beliefs was declining as Aboriginal youth, a group with high alcoholism and drug abuse rates, were increasingly apathetic about participating in Dreaming related activities. For more on this see: Perkins, Hetti in Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia (Sydney, Australia: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004).

45 Kjellgren cites another example of punishment by rain (Kjellgren 1999, 75).
maintenance of Aboriginal Law. It was through the ownership of such an important cultural symbol that Thomas gained his cultural authority among the Gija at Warmun (Ryan 1993a, 45). And it is my argument that the acquisition of this authority was central to Thomas’ decision to paint.

By 1983 when Thomas began to paint images for non-Aboriginal consumption, Mary Macha had already purchased works from Jaminji for almost two years (Thomas et al. 2003, 48). Thomas would have been well aware of Jaminji’s activities during this time as Macha was a frequent visitor to Warmun. Additionally, owing to the small size of the community at Warmun, Thomas would have certainly had multiple occasions to request painting supplies from her during this period. Notably, it was in 1983 that the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* was performed in Perth at an Aboriginal Arts Festival celebrating the strength of Aboriginal culture (Stanton 2007, 242). This performance in Perth is frequently mentioned by Thomas in discussions on the cultural importance of the *balga*. That he did not begin to paint independently of Jaminji until after the *Gurirr Gurirr* had achieved success among Aboriginal audiences suggests that cultural concerns, not merely fiscal concerns or issues of access to materials, motivated Thomas’ decision to create non-traditional paintings.

Closer consideration of Aboriginal concerns over authority and ownership might also provide context for troubling statements from the *I want to paint* catalog. In an interview in the catalog Mary Macha states: “[Rover] was lazy! He’d not collect his own ochres and gums if he could help it” (Thomas et al. 2003). By assuming that Thomas’ requests that she procure ochre for him to use in his paintings presents evidence of his laziness, Macha failed to consider the cultural importance of ochre for Aboriginal peoples. Ochre, used in Aboriginal ritual and ceremonial practices in addition to art making practices, is mined from the local environment.
Victoria Finlay has aptly written that ochre “is not only from the land; it is the land” (2002, 40). Aboriginal ochre mining sites, like other *Dreaming* sites, can only be accessed by negotiating permission for access from the ritual owners of the site.\(^{46}\) During the period Macha was describing she was routinely flying Thomas from his home in Warmun to Perth where he worked in a studio she had created in her garage. It is possible that by requesting ochre from Macha, Thomas attempted to negotiate the difficult issue of securing resources when the customary owners were unknown to him. Additionally, it should be noted that Thomas supplied Gordon Hudson, then head conservator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, with a supply of his ochres before his death (Green-Armytage 2012, 11). This action suggests that Thomas valued the pigments. By supplying Hudson with the ochers for future use he was demonstrating both forethought and concern over the future integrity of his paintings.\(^ {47}\)

Macha’s failure to understand Thomas’ reluctance to procure his own ochres illustrates a larger cultural breach. Careful reconsideration of the connection between Thomas, the *Gururr* *Gururr balga*, and its importance to Aboriginal people problematizes previous interpretations of Thomas as a rogue actor who operates outside of traditional cultural boundaries. Upon reflection, such characterizations reveal themselves to be overly dependent on an incomplete understanding of the cultural context of the work. Through analysis of the symbolic importance of the *Gururr Gururr balga*, Thomas emerges as an agent deeply concerned with local, social, and cultural systems. This correlation between Thomas and his cultural connections to the East Kimberley region manifests itself in his decision to paint both historical and contemporary subjects.

\(^{46}\) Although access to *Country* is almost universally granted when permission is properly sought from the ritual owner, the penalty for trespass is severe and sometimes violent. For more on ownership and access see Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* (1986).

\(^{47}\) The mineral composition of ochres varies greatly according to the origin site. The chemical compositions of the pigments are sufficiently unique that the source of a particular sample can be sourced to within 50 km. Best practices for restoration work on ochre pigment paintings require use of ochre sourced from the same site as those employed in the creation of the original work of art which requires both knowledge of the site and permissions from the traditional owners (Green-Armytage 2012).
CHAPTER III. COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTS

Thomas’ choice of historical and contemporary subject matter reveals the continued importance of Aboriginal cultural concerns to his artistic practice, as seen in his paintings *Ruby Plains Killings 1 & 2* (1990) and *Lake Argyle* (1986). The inclusion of colonial historical subject matter in Thomas’ work provides an aspect of East Kimberley painting that has received much attention (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994; Thomas et al. 2003; National Gallery of Australia and Quaill 1997). However, the connection between Thomas’ selection of the subject matter and the open (non-secretive) nature of the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards has not previously been explored.

In the paintings *Ruby Plains Killings 1 & 2* (Figures 9 and 10), Thomas employs “minimalist” composition and expressive use of color to document the massacre of a small group of Aboriginal people by white drovers and property owners. The killings occurred at Ruby Plains Station, south of Halls Creek, in reprisal for the unauthorized butchering of a bullock (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 43). Although a precise date for this massacre has yet to be determined, it can be loosely identified as occurring in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries during a period now colloquially referred to as “The Killing Times.”

Painted in 1990, the year Thomas exhibited in the Venice Biennale, the works depict the site of the massacre. In *Ruby Plains Killing 1*, Thomas has employed simultaneous perspectives within the composition. The foreground and background are separated by a narrow ribbon of color bound by white dots. This element sets up a flattened lateral perspective of the Kimberley region’s hills, in which the brown ribbon of color accented by parallel lines of white dotting simultaneously suggests the silhouette of the hills and the path of the creek. The central figure of *Ruby Plains Killing 1* represents one of the most chilling aspects of the murders; according to
oral tradition, the heads of the victims were decapitated and placed inside hollow logs. Considered from an aerial perspective, the central figure can be read as a log lying flat, with a skull positioned inside. But Thomas’ complex rendering, which seems to oscillate between aerial and lateral viewpoints, can be further interpreted as a reference to *larrakitj*, or Yolngu hollow-log coffins that are installed vertically, investing the image with yet another layer of meaning.\(^{48}\) *Ruby Plains Killing 2* adopts a more straightforward approach to the subject, widening the aerial landscape to include the Ruby Plains station (marked by concentric circles in the top right corner of the painting), the road connecting the station to Balgo Hills, and the path of a creek which feeds into the Ord River.

There are no official government records of any aboriginal massacres in the 20th century; however, this lack of documentary evidence should be taken with some degree of skepticism as the political climate at the time was not sympathetic to Aboriginal peoples and such behavior had largely been decriminalized. Despite the lack of government documentation, there are twelve generally accepted massacre sites within a 150 kilometer radius of Warmun (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 40). Until recent decades, when the history of these colonial massacres has gained wider acceptance despite the lack of governmental documentation or physical evidence, the knowledge of this history had been maintained solely by Aboriginal peoples through an oral tradition.\(^{49}\)

Thomas’ canvases can be read as an extension of the oral traditions through which memory of these events were maintained. When considered in this context, the functional similarities between these “Killing Times” paintings, as they are commonly referred to in the

\(^{48}\) For a brief account on the hollow log coffin tradition see Howard Morphy’s essay “Larrakitj—Death and the Celebration of Life,” in *Larrakitj: Kerry Stokes Collection* (2010).

\(^{49}\) The specific details and degree of the genocide campaign during the “Killing Times” continues to be an issue of contentious debate in Australia with ultra-conservative historians such as Keith Windschuttle arguing that Aboriginal accounts have been exaggerated. For more on the “history wars” see *Whitewash* (Manne 2003).
scholarship, and the performance of the popular *balga* are striking. Like the *Gurirr Gurirr* boards, the works contain public knowledge, information that Thomas intends to communicate to a broad audience through his art. The clear and direct compositional structure of these images functions on a textual level, providing in as clear and concise terms as possible a direct statement on colonial history. In their role of “picture as witness,” the images do not require a complete retelling of the historical narrative, but rather boldly indicate the stain made on the landscape by the colonial encounter.

The presence of “Killing Times” history at Mt King and Bedford Downs Station provide another link between the performance and the painting. I propose that through ownership of the *Gurirr Gurirr*, Thomas would have acquired some authority over associated sites and stories. Moreover, in my opinion, such claims may have been bolstered by Thomas’ personal connections to these pastoral sites during his time working as a drover. It is known that some of the incidents depicted in the “Killing Times” paintings occurred on stations where Thomas had worked (Brody and Holmes à Court Collection 1997, 67). Interpreted in this way, Thomas’ decision to paint colonial subjects may have been as much tied to considerations of cultural agency as to any political impulse.\(^50\) Simply put, historical subject matter provided Thomas an additional range of subjects that he could legitimately pursue.

The issue of cultural authority is central to developing an understanding of key differences between Thomas’ depiction of the “Killing Times” narratives and depictions by other East Kimberley artists painting similar subjects. Consider Thomas’ painting *The Burning Site* (1990) in relation to Paddy Bedford’s *Emu Dreaming at Mt King* (1999) (Figures 11 and 12). Thomas’ version of the subject reads as an aerial landscape rendered in three colors: a rich

\(^{50}\) In this context I am using the term “colonial” to encapsulate events that occurred after British settlement and political domination, in direct contrast with ancestral, or *Dreaming*, subjects that are considered by Aboriginal peoples to be outside the boundaries of history.
chocolate ochre, an umber wash, and the characteristic white dotting. A delicate compositional balance belies the dark content of the subject matter. In the artist’s documentation for *The Burning Site*, Thomas focuses on the geographical features of the landscape, identifying hills and roadways and marking the site of the massacre with concentric circles. Mt King, which is visited by the spirit/woman during a verse of the *Gurrr Gurrir balga*, was the site of a particularly gruesome massacre believed to have occurred in 1924.\(^5\)

In contrast, Gija artist Paddy Bedford chose to emphasize the *Dreaming* narrative associated with the site rather than the colonial one in his painting, which adopts a lateral perspective. Like Thomas, Bedford used a restricted tri-color pallet, employing white dotting to accentuate the line between figurative elements. Rather than depicting an expansive landscape, Bedford chose to depict the Emu ancestor and the narrow cracks in the rock as a distinguishing feature of the site and central to the *Dreaming* narrative. Bedford, a traditional owner of the *Emu Dreaming* and direct ancestor of a survivor of the massacre, therefore references the historical event only obliquely. Although both paintings depict the same geographical site, the content of the two paintings remains markedly different.

It seems appropriate to return to the issue of cultural authority to search for a possible explanation for this degree of difference. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, the dominant view of Thomas’ selection and treatment of subjects is that he is “not locked inside the language patterns or ritual structures of the Western Desert” but rather “looks beyond them to another world or reality and enjoys the freedom to depict this expansively,” this case study seems

\(^5\) According to oral tradition, the station owner directed a group of Aboriginal people to gather a large pile of firewood. After the wood was collected, the Aboriginal people were given a meal of beef, bread, and ham that had been laced with strychnine. Those who did not immediately die of the poison were shot. The assembled wood was then used to burn the bodies of the dead. This massacre is the subject of a *joonba* or open dance performance, titled *Fire, Fire Burning Bright*, which was performed at the 2000 Telstra Art Award in Darwin and subsequently became a point of contention in the aforementioned “history wars” (Moran 2002, 48).
to directly refute such romantic claims (Ryan 1993a, 44). Thomas’ decision to restrict his depiction of Mt King to the historical subject suggests to me a nuanced consideration of Aboriginal conceptions of cultural authority. As a pastoral worker, Thomas may have felt an ownership of the “Killing Times” story, which allowed him to paint the narrative. Conversely he was unable to include the *Emu Dreaming* story because he could not properly claim ownership of that *Dreaming*.

In addition to recent historical events, such as the “Killing Times” narratives, Thomas also chose contemporary subjects for his works. The painting *Lake Argyle* (1986) takes the damming of the Ord River and the resultant creation of Lake Argyle as its subject (Figure 13). Like many of his earlier works, the painting is rendered in a palette restricted to two color fields, deep ochre and charcoal, punctuated by creamy white dotting. The waters of the Ord River (top right corner) and Lake Argyle are shown in black. The dam appears in the upper left corner.

Lake Argyle was created as part of a development project undertaken between 1959 and 1972 with the construction of a hydro-electric dam on the Ord River. The project, a joint venture between the Australian federal government and the government of Western Australia, aimed to produce hydro-electric power and a more secure supply of water for farm irrigation in the region (Symanski 1996, 573). The land flooded in the creation of Lake Argyle contained a number of important *Dreaming* sites including a Miriwun rock shelter dating back at least 18,000 years (Head 1999). The creation of Lake Argyle was a significant social and cultural trauma to the Aboriginal peoples in the East Kimberley region (National Gallery of Australia and Quaill 1997, 92).

In Thomas’ iconographical description of the work, the artist describes the destructive impact of the lake: “Big hole there. The water, lake, go right down. No corroboree because
Kartiya bin made dam. But big story where star bin fall…” (Thomas, Akerman, and National Gallery of Australia 1994, 58). Thomas seems to be verbalizing the sentiment that the loss of the important site equates to the death of the related ceremonial tradition.

Lake Argyle, like Mt King, is a site visited by the spirit/woman in the Gurirr Gurirr dance cycle; and again, as with the Mt King painting, Thomas has restricted his imagery on the geographical and historical imagery and left the Dreaming associations implied. I do not mean to misleadingly suggest that Thomas never painted Dreaming sites from either his home Country or Gija Country. Clearly he did. Outstanding examples include Barramundi Dreaming (1983) and Ngarrangkarni (1984) (Figures 14 and 15). My purpose here in highlighting colonial and contemporary subjects has been an attempt to suggest an alternate reading of Thomas’ practice as grounded in—rather than subversive of—larger Aboriginal cultural systems. In fact, the remarkable facet of Thomas’ inclusion of these colonial and contemporary subjects is his treatment of them within the same visual framework as the Gurirr Gurirr and Ngarrangkarni subjects. In this way, the works can be read as an extension of the Gurirr Gurirr themes explored in the previous chapter. By painting these subjects as ingrained in Country, Thomas again unites historical, contemporary, and Dreaming temporal dimensions in a reaffirmation of the continued importance and vitality of Aboriginal Law. Considered in this context, Thomas should be understood as an Aboriginal artist working from within an Aboriginal worldview.

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52 Ngarrangkarni is the Gija word for the Dreaming.
CONCLUSION

By analyzing the centrality of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* to the artistic practice of the Aboriginal artist Rover Thomas, my goal has been to illustrate the development of a culturally grounded and contextually appropriate framework for the artist’s painting practice. By problematizing a strictly geographical reading of Thomas’ “minimalist” aesthetic, I have offered an alternative analysis connected to the work’s communicative function (Chapter 1). From this groundwork, I then explored the cultural importance of the *Gurirr Gurirr balga* discovered by Thomas in relation to the East Kimberley region and established the dance cycle as central to Thomas’ painting practice (Chapter 2). This facilitated a critical examination of the popular mythology surrounding this artist, ultimately creating a new understanding of Thomas as operating from within, rather than being subversive to, Aboriginal conceptions of ownership and authority. Finally, I investigated Thomas’ depiction of colonial, historical, and contemporary subject matter through an analysis of three seminal works, thereby demonstrating that they could potentially be read as an extension of the *Gurirr Gurirr* dance cycle (Chapter 3).

It is my intention that this study will serve as the basis for further examination of Thomas, about whom many questions remain unanswered. In addition to a thorough cataloging of his work, which would be of great benefit to further study, the need exists for additional analysis of Thomas’ *Dreaming* subjects, both those related to the *Country* of his birth and those connected to his adopted home in Gija *Country*. 
FIGURES

Figure 1: Western Australia and the Northern Territory [map]. 2013. Scale undetermined; generated by Kate Blake; using Google Maps https://maps.google.com/?mid=1371608645 (17 June 2013).
Figure 2: Rover Thomas, *The Rainbow Serpent Destroyed Darwin*, 1983. Natural earth pigments and binders on composition board, 120.0 h x 60.0 w cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Figure 3: Paddy Jaminji, *Ngumurli Warra (Cyclone Tracy)*, 1983. Natural earth pigments and natural and synthetic binder. 92 x 92 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy of The Australian Art Sales Digest.
Figure 4: Rover Thomas, *Cyclone Tracy*, 1991. Natural pigments on canvas, 183 x 168 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Figure 5: Paddy Jaminji, *Cloud, Krill Krill Ceremony*, 1984. Natural earth pigments on board, 60 x 90 cm. Image courtesy of http://www.artrecord.com.

Figure 7: Traditional Locations of Aboriginal Languages [map]. Scale: 1cm = 50km. In: Ryan, Judith, Kim Akerman, and National Gallery of Victoria. Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley. Melbourne, Vic.: National Gallery of Victoria, 1993, p. i.
Figure 9: Rover Thomas, *Ruby Plains Killing 1*, 1990. Natural pigments on canvas, 90.0 x 180.0 cm. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia.

Figure 10: Rover Thomas, *Ruby Plains Killing 2*, 1990. Painting, natural gum and pigments on canvas, 90.0 x 110.0 cm. Canberra, National Gallery of Australia.

Figure 12: Paddy Bedford, *Emu Dreaming at Mt King*, 1999. Ochres on canvas, 135 x 122 cm. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Gift of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner.
Figure 13: Rover Thomas, *Lake Argyle*, 1986. Natural pigments on canvas, 90 x 180 cm. National Gallery of Australia.

Figure 14: Rover Thomas, *Barramundi Dreaming*, 1989. Natural pigments on canvas, 90 x 200 cm. National Gallery of Australia.
Figure 15: Rover Thomas, *Two Men Dreaming*, c. 1985. Natural pigments on canvas, 91 x 61 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales.
REFERENCES


