

The word according to Wakartu

Wakartu Cory Surprise's bold compositions, restricted palette and sheer expressive originality have her admirers proclaiming her among our foremost abstract painters, writes Maurice O'Riordan. Portrait by Paul Miller.



"At first I sat down here with nothing, no corroboree ... then that Kurungal (Christmas Creek) mob brought that corroboree. That was a long time ago. I woke up when I heard that word." (Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Ngajakura Ngurrara Minyarti: This is my Country* exhibition catalogue, 1994.)

Wakartu Cory Surprise is an artist whose life in many ways typifies the experience of outback Aboriginal women of her generation. From a Great Sandy Desert upbringing in which she walked her country with family, effectively free of contact with the kartiya (whitefella) world, she was enlisted into the Kimberley's expanding pastoral industry as a young teenager, working at various cattle stations before settling at Go Go Station and eventually the nearby township of Fitzroy Crossing in the south Kimberley. Typically, she came to painting relatively late in life, at around the age of 50, after many years of rigorous station work. There's nothing overly typical though about Wakartu's manifest painting. In a community and art centre acclaimed for both its large-scale collaborations and major individual talents, Wakartu wields a powerful blend of no-nonsense seniority and sheer, expressive originality. Word from her ever-widening circle of admirers casts her destiny as one of Aboriginal art's foremost abstract painters.

The word was quite literally the beginning of Wakartu's painting career as it was for most of Fitzroy Crossing's eclectic team of painters. Not in the biblical sense, although Wakartu's life history can seem scaled to biblical proportions and her subjects deeply anchored in Walmajarri religious law. The 'word' was the town's introduction of literacy classes through the Karrayili Adult Education Centre in 1982, a program initially requested by a group of senior Aboriginal men and which spread to nearby Bayulu and ultimately into drawing and painting as a way of illustrating text and narrative. The introduction to the 1996 exhibition catalogue for the show titled *Minyarti Wangki Ngajukura Ngurrarajangka: This is the Word from my Country*

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This page: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Warnti*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.

Opposite page: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Pamarr (hill)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.



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notes that the literacy students tired of “reading little books about Nip and Fluff, Dick and Dora. We were sick of these books so we decided to write our own about bush trips and stories for country.” A decade after its inception Karrayili realised its first major art exhibition, in Adelaide (National Aboriginal Cultural Institute – Tandanya), 1991. This was followed by the formation of its offshoot Mangkaja Arts in 1993.

‘Gestural’ and ‘untrammelled’ are curator **Judith Ryan**’s words to describe the work of (some) Fitzroy Crossing artists included in three of the National Gallery of Victoria’s exhibitions: the seminal Kimberley exhibition and the thematic survey Aboriginal art exhibitions, *Images of Power* (1992/’93) and *Colour Power* (2004) respectively.

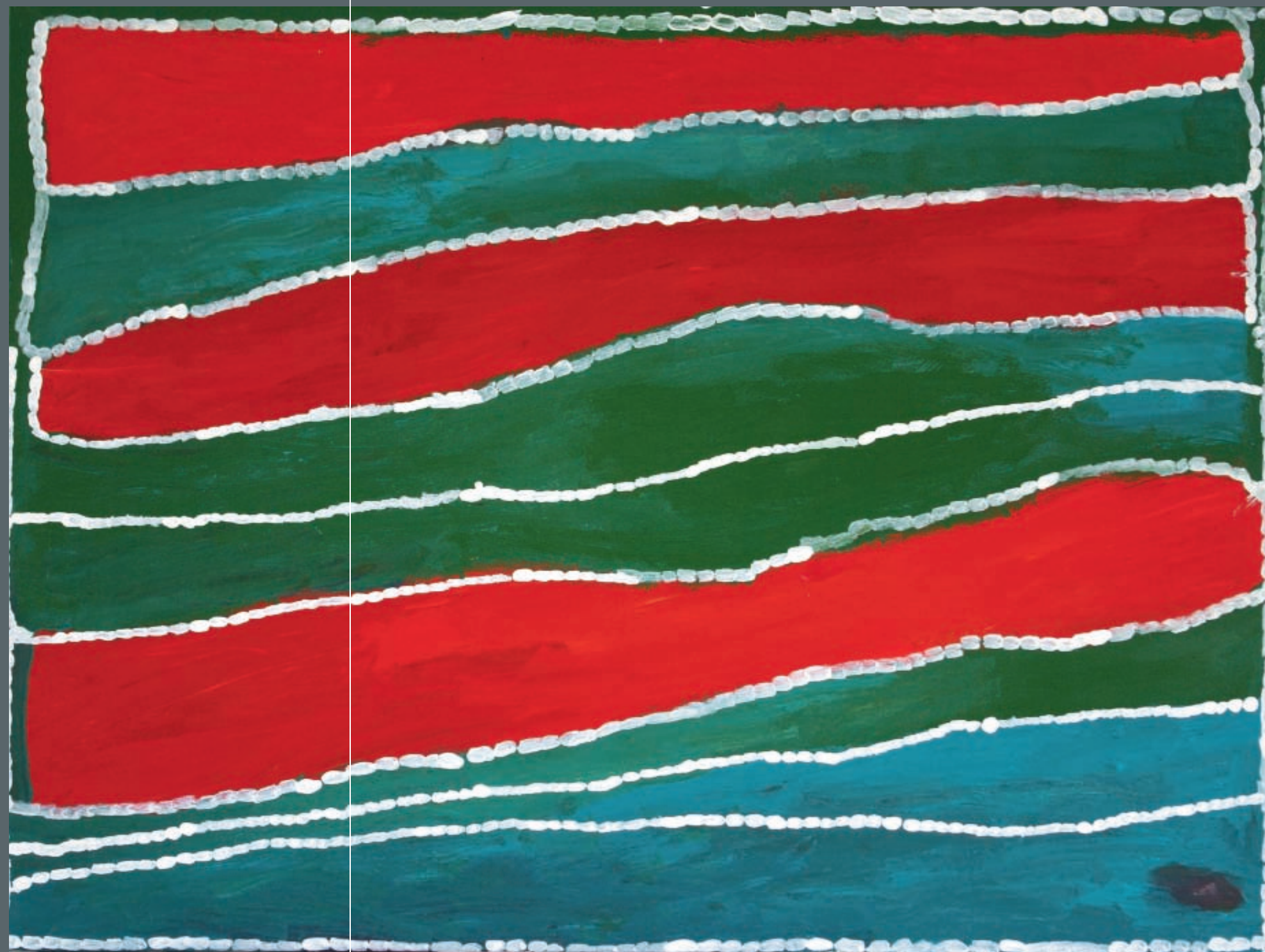
To some degree these words apply to Wakartu’s painting and to the Karrayili artists’ predominant and looser medium of acrylic on paper during their first decade of practice. Ryan’s description is not meant to encapsulate a definitive Fitzroy Crossing style. There has been too much diversity among the town’s painters to warrant this. This diversity was partly set in motion by its pioneering, maverick artists **Jimmy Pike**, **Pijaju Peter Skipper** and **David Jarinyanu Downs** whose careers developed independently of Karrayili’s and Mangkaja’s.

Fitzroy Crossing itself, the product of pastoral-led incursions into the region dating from the late 19th century, represents an amalgam of local Fitzroy River Aboriginal groups with the desert Walmajarri and Wangkajunga groups from further south that began settling in the town after its establishment in the 1950s. (Wakartu’s quote above emphasises the cultural revival brought about by this influx.) The disparate styles of Fitzroy Crossing artists like **Butcher Cherel Janangoo**, **Paji Honeychild Yankarr** and **Daisy Andrews** echo this Aboriginal multiculturalism and its varying, idiosyncratic allegiances to classical and introduced aesthetic modes.

Wakartu was part of the Walmajarri ‘drift’ into the region’s pastoral stations before the Second World War. She recalls being taken at one point from Noonkanbah to Fitzroy Police Station “because we were bushmen,” travelling between stations and throughout ancestral country without the need for clothes. This ‘drift’ was in reality more like enslavement. Wakartu remembers the police herding Aboriginal men with chains around their necks before, like her, becoming a cheap labour source for pastoral owners. Station life, however, didn’t rule out the practice of ceremonial life, which was maintained at Go Go and Christmas Creek stations. When the going got too hard, there was always the option of running away back to country, which Wakartu did several times.

The few written accounts of Wakartu’s life form a record of epic understatement: “When I was crawling age I went to Christmas Creek”, “We had no flour, nothing”, “I got big mob of kids ... some of them finish up now.” Perhaps it’s in the brevity of translation or in the standardising of Wakartu’s English but according to **Paul Miller**, Mangkaja’s current exhibition coordinator, Wakartu does like to tell a story. Her broad-brush approach may mean some details change from one account to the next without diluting the truth or heart of the narrative. This fondness for storytelling has essentially been Wakartu’s trigger for painting over the past two decades. The resulting body of work is consistently epic in concept; her core themes and narratives often repeated with varying formal and symbolic inflections. The use of the term ‘understatement’ may not live up to the colour-strong depth of Wakartu’s paintings, though it does pinpoint their aesthetic economy and immediacy.

In the catalogue for *Images of Power*, Wakartu is mentioned as an artist who didn’t know her own country and had to learn about it from others in order to paint it. The catalogue’s chapter on Fitzroy Crossing artists is titled *Images of Dislocation*, an indication that the artists were mostly painting about country from which they had moved or been moved. The subsequent *Ngurrara canvases*



Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Wirrkarrjartu jila (waterhole)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.

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collaboratively produced by Mangkaja artists as evidence for Native Title hearings suggest this dislocation was neither permanent nor totally disempowering. Equally, subsequent statements from Wakartu clearly contradict the notion that her knowledge of country is second-hand:

"Nobody taught me how to paint. I put down my own ideas. I saw these places myself; I went there with the old people. I paint jilji (sand hills), jumu (soak water), jiwari (rock hole), pamerr (hills and rock country). I think about mangarri (vegetable food) and kuyu (game) from my country and when I was there. When I paint I am thinking about law from a long time ago. I am thinking about the country, my country." (Catalogue from solo exhibition, Raft Artspace and Mangkaja Arts at Silvershot gallery, Melbourne, 2006. Translation Paul Miller.)

As Miller relates, Wakartu is revered among Mangkaja artists and respected by other elders. "She is full of in-depth knowledge and not afraid to get in there and say something or have a go." This resourcefulness can be seen in her early experimentation with ochres (in *Mangkaja* (1991), for example, reproduced in *Images of Power*) or in the way she mixes acrylic colour directly onto the canvas – unique among Mangkaja's artists according to Miller. This directness of application can lead to some exciting tonal and colour shifts which help to foster an appreciation of Wakartu as a painter's painter, somewhat akin to the impact of Rover Thomas in this regard. For Mangkaja's manager, **Mandy McGuire**, Wakartu's paintings "echo her determination and strength of character. One could say there is masculinity expressed in the bold compositions and choice of colour but it is not necessarily the rule." Like Thomas, Wakartu employs a restricted (albeit changing and more contrasting) palette and relatively spare visual vocabulary. Whether this is a 'masculine' affinity in Aboriginal art is difficult to say though Wakartu certainly did her share of 'men's work' on the cattle stations.

Approaching 80 years of age, Wakartu is presently one of Mangkaja's most senior and most productive artists, rarely missing a day of painting at the art centre and currently undergoing something of a renaissance in her work. Miller attributes this to a renewed interest in her involvement at the centre. The more she has been encouraged to talk about her painting, the more responsive she has become with paintings of both complex and simple associations exuding more power. This productive output, a "pouring out of hidden knowledge" as Miller sees it, has enabled Wakartu's career to move beyond the group exhibition into two-person and solo exhibitions since 2004. She has shown at Broome's Short Street Gallery

This page: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Mullgarn jumu and jilji (soakwater and sandhills)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.

Opposite page top: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Palpajarra warla (lake)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.

Bottom: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Kurtujarra*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 120cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.



with Widjee Henry (2004) and Mona Chuguna (2006) and was the leading name, *Cory Surprise and Friends*, for Mangkaja's second international exhibition (after a Rebecca Hossack Gallery show, London, 1998) at Singapore's Red Dot Gallery in 2005. Her first solo exhibition was with Sydney's Boutwell Draper Gallery in 2004. Co-director James Draper recalls a show bolstered by many great works but one which also evinced the need to cultivate appreciation among a public fixated on the big names in Aboriginal art.

Wakartu had in fact previously earned distinction as the winner of the Telstra Works on Paper Award in the 14th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (1997, judged by Avril Quail and James Mollison). This was for a work, *Tapu*, based on the particular country of her birth and that of her father's death (by fire) when she was a small child. The palette mirrors natural ochres – even fire – (warm red-brown-yellow hues, black, white) and shows the loose textural delineation of her horizontal jilji (sand hill) forms, rippling and congealing around a white-lined waterhole, pitch-black but for a faint lick of red. A decade on, and Wakartu's selected entry for this year's Telstra Award (*Pamarr (hill) and Myartarta*) also deals covertly with death, in this case her brother's. Though he died a long time ago, the memory of him kindles deep wells of emotion in this painting, which also gives homage to the country Wayampajarti where Wakartu grew up with her two brothers and which she calls her own. The painting transmits a fluid symmetry of forms, colour - in luscious sweeps and layers, haphazard flecks – and dotting – close-knit (sate stick-applied) and broad, blurry stipples. The effect is invigorating. The work overall attests to Wakartu's strong artistic conviction, to her masterful, painterly eloquence. ■

Works by Wakartu Cory Surprise will appear in a survey exhibition at Woolangabba Art Gallery in Brisbane from August 17 to October 5, 2007. Raft Artspace is staging a solo exhibition of her work at Silvershot Gallery, Melbourne from 8 to 21 October, 2007.

Contacts for Wakartu Cory Surprise include: Mangkaja Arts, Fitzroy Crossing; Raft Artspace, Darwin and Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney.

This page: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Pirrtil warla (claypan)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 120cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.

Opposite page: Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Myartarta pamarr (hill)*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 90cm. COURTESY: MANGKAJA ARTS, FITZROY CROSSING.



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