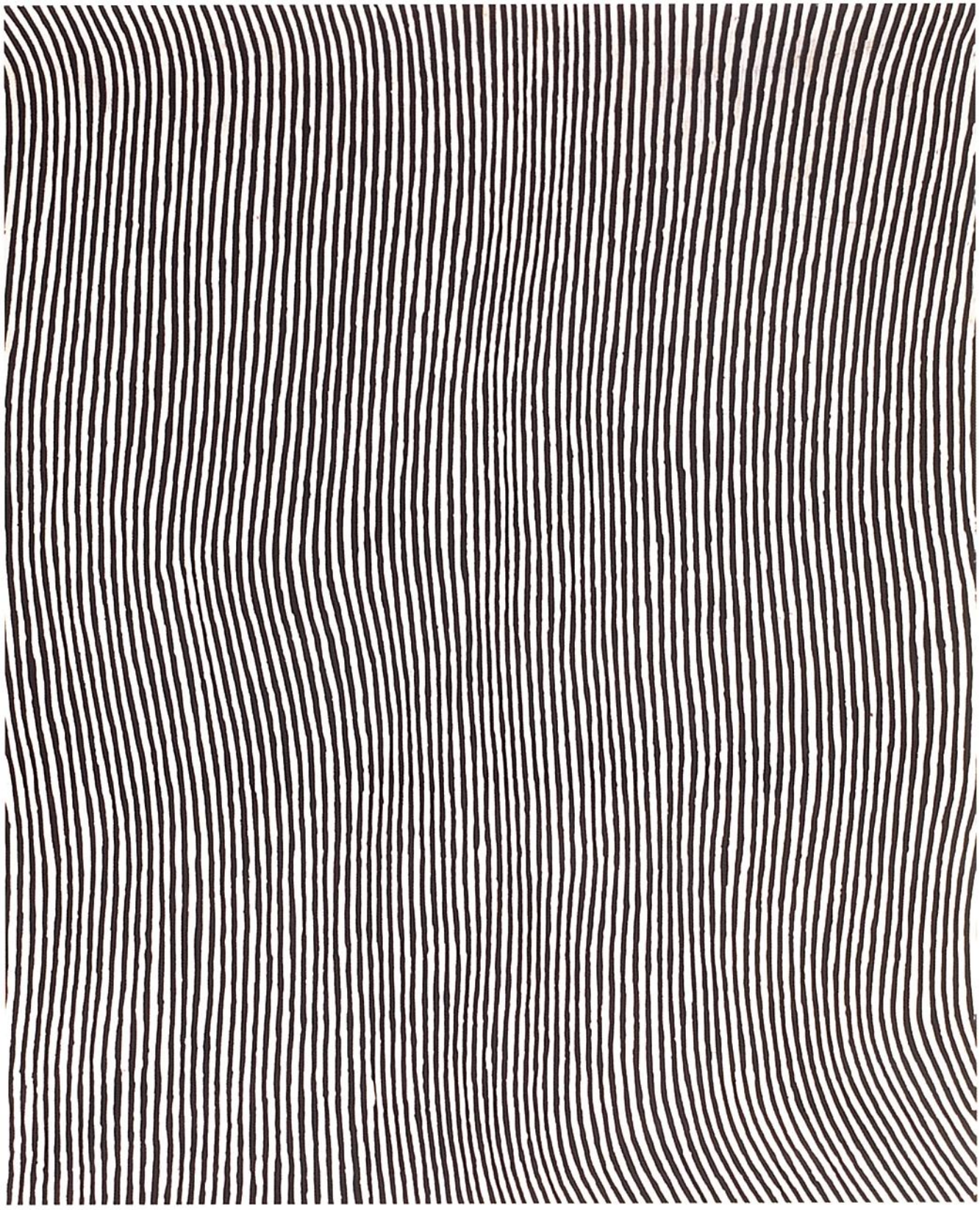
Ronnie Tjampitjinpa *Untitled* 2002 acrylic on linen 153 x 122 cm © the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

BINOCULAR: looking closely at Country



George Tjungurrayi *Untitled* 2002 acrylic on linen 153 x 122 cm © the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

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Painting is nothing without history Michael Nelson Tjakamarra[1]

Painting is, I think, inevitably an archaic activity and one that depends on spiritual values Bridget Riley[2]

There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject (or content...) is crucial Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko (in collaboration with Barnett Newman)[3]

Dating from the early 1990s to the present, works in this exhibition can be considered both as contemporary abstract art in a Western sense and as deeply spiritual creations within their Aboriginal context.

Appreciation for contemporary Aboriginal art has risen both nationally and internationally since Geoffrey Bardon first encouraged acrylic painting at Papunya in 1971. Evidence of this appreciation is found in the writing of the art critic Robert Hughes, who called it "the last great art movement of the world"[4] and by Edmund Capon, Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, who described it as "one of the most dynamic movements in Australian art history"[5].

Following in the wake of seminal exhibitions such as Utopia Art Sydney's *Ab-Op*[6] and the Art Gallery of New South Wales' landmark *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*[7], this exhibition documents the ongoing development of an art movement of optically stimulating paintings which is expanding across Australia's Indigenous communities. The intention is to approach these works with a *binocular*[8] view: with both an appreciation of their contemporary optical abstraction within international art, and with respect for their deeply spiritual connection to the Country they celebrate.

One's first impression is that these paintings are similar to those produced during the Op Art movements of the 1960s, when illusions of visual perception were used to create an impression of oscillating and vibrating three-dimensional space.

Similarities might be drawn between these paintings and those of artists such as Victor Vasarely, who employed geometric precision to create bulges of three-dimensional space; M. C. Escher's paradoxes; Josef Albers' use of colour to create optical illusions; Rothko's use of colour to evoke moody spiritual elation; through to Keith Haring's maze-like graphics and the sensations of movement generated by Bridget Riley's use of abstract forms. Further, the spiritual depiction of landscape may evoke parallels with the contemplation evoked by Zen gardens, such as those at Ryoanji in Japan.

The paintings in this exhibition achieve all of the above but also represent a growing movement of optically challenging work by Aboriginal artists.

The vibrating effects, repetitions of lines, shapes or forms and the intense use of colour have not grown from the study of Western art history but are based on traditional stories, site-specific rituals, ceremonies and locations, as well as landscape depictions.

They suggest profound expressions and complex associations. A large number of the paintings are of a secret or sacred nature and consequently their meaning is hidden from outsiders. This allows the uninitiated viewer to meditate on their pure physicality and to feel the power they emanate.

Their beginnings can be found in rock, sand and body paintings and associated ceremonies of ritual singing and dancing. Over the last decade, with the introduction of acrylic paints and canvases, as well as more rapid communication and exchange between communities, they have developed into less complicated, more vivid forms.

By bending the rules of perspective, illusions of three-dimensional space are created. Visual perceptions are manipulated by elementary striping, which causes the viewer's eyes to seek urgently a way to make sense of the changing image. Many of the works have layers of colour and line, making it difficult to interpret; they create half-glimpsed fleeting shadows, like fugitive images behind the obvious surface. Others offer a vibrancy of colour that flashes in and out of the surface.

Mysterious yet potent, they captivate their audience by looping rythyms and repetitious spatial organisation that wobble before the eyes. Simultaneously realist and abstract – depending on the viewer's cultural origins – they offer a fresh vision of landscape; related to life and to observation, and with reverence for lived and handed down experience.

Indigenous Australian art and Western art share parallels in their dependence on traditional history and religious affinities. Both the spiritual importance of these works to Indigenous Australians and the representation of site-specific *Country* are paramount to their creation and meaning. Some works have a *hidden spirit* or *energy force* sometimes moving just out of viewpoint, or appearing as a fleeting vision or *moving picture* within the flatness of the two dimensional canvas.

Contemplation is required to experience this presence. This enables the viewer to feel the underlying *spiritual force* embedded within the work. It also requires focus. One's eyes struggle to make sense of the movement caused by the linear bulges, depressions and corrugations. Some pieces require distance to enjoy these sensations. Others require closer inspection to invoke a meditative state.

The exhibition comprises approximately seventy works in traditional and non-traditional media, including acrylic on canvas, and ochres on eucalyptus bark and hollow log memorial poles. Central to the exhibition is the inclusion of young and emerging artists, alongside their more senior counterparts, from communities whose work has never before been contextualized within the broader movement of optically stimulating contemporary abstract painting.

This genre appears to be developing most rapidly in central Australia, although work from north-east Arnhem Land is also included in the show. The artists represented originate from Kintore, Kiwikurra, Utopia, Balgo, Alice Springs and Yirrkala. The aim is to exhibit works seldom seen by the general public, and therefore pieces have been sourced primarily from private collections.

Our objectives are to exhibit some of the best contemporary art in Australia, promoting accessibility of contemporary Aboriginal art to wider audiences and stimulating new approaches to the debates surrounding traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art. This exhibition documents a representative group of artists whose work reflects this contemporary art movement, contributing a significant overview of the genre.

We invite you to enjoy these paintings and allow your senses to be stimulated.

Beverley Fielder 2004

[1] Interview with Emmanuel de Roux, *Painters of time*, Le Monde, The Guardian Weekly, April 22 – 28, 2004; p. 29, para. 2.
[2] "Interview with Michael Craig-Martin, Bridget Riley", 1992; *Dialogues on Art*, Zwemmer, London UK, 1995, p. 63.
[3] 'Letter to the Editor', *The New York Times*, 13 June 1943, NY USA, sec. 2.9.
[4] *Australia: Beyond the Fatal Shore*; produced by Oxford Film and Television for the BBC in association with Thirteen/WNET New York, Australian Broadcasting, and NVC Arts, September 2000.
[5] Foreword, *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* catalogue, AGNSW, Sydney 2000, p. 7.
[6] Utopia Art Sydney, February 1999. Ab-Op2, Utopia Art Sydney, June 2003.
[7] AGNSW, 2000.
[8] binocular – for both eyes (Latin *bini* two together, *oculus* eye). *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford University Press.

Good vibrations...

These are stimulating paintings that excite the optic nerve and challenge one's vision. Amongst the ideas underlying the development of this exhibition was the desire to hang a group of these paintings together and provide an unusually intense and engaging viewing experience.

All the works can be analysed in the light of the history of the regional art movements from which they emanate – and the overall history of Aboriginal art. Non-figurative and geometric paintings have always been painted in both the Western Desert and Arnhem Land regions. While they display a disciplined aesthetic there is nothing rigid or artificial about these paintings. There is a sense that the artists are playing with our minds.

Most of the works are by Pintupi artists from Kintore and Kiwirrkura with several examples from artists working at Wirrimanu (Balgo) and Utopia. The inclusion of larrakitj (hollow log memorial poles) and bark paintings from Yirrkala in north eastern Arnhem Land, where artists have also been exploring abstract imagery, is intended to counterpoint the paintings from the Western Desert and allow a brief glimpse into another regional aesthetic that is also presently at the cutting edge of innovation. The larrakitj show the designs in the round and offer the possibility that the ultimate realisation of these designs could be completely three-dimensional, self-supporting structures. Perhaps the artists' esoteric knowledge enables them to use a distinct form of molecular modelling that relates to the environment. This is a purely speculative idea at this point.

The visual depictions of Tjukurrpa[1] have been reduced to the essence of each location. The paintings literally visualise the unseen power residing in the land via surface traces emanating from deep underground. It is as if the ancestral spirit is vibrating for that place. Humming away like invisible high tension power cables reaching from deep under the ground into the atmosphere replicating the fabric of the universe where increasingly complex networks of association are made manifest.

The paintings exercise forms of visual tension creating an effect that bounces the eye around the surface or makes the lines appear to flicker. This effect is more than just an optical sensation, it is also physical. Participants in ceremony tap into the Earth's magnetic energies. Ceremonial song and dance reverberates through the earth and permeates the ancestral presences soothing and reassuring the resident ancestors that the Law is being upheld. At these events waves of energy overwhelm both participants and onlookers. The paintings may also provide sites where ancestral veneration takes place during the creative process. The flexibility of the aesthetic system allows for multiple references so that a painting that appears to be a regular pattern derived from a ceremonial body paint design may in fact also refer to the rhythmic beat of a love song and its repetitive chorus. These layered references are site specific.

Many of the paintings resemble the patterns of wind on sand or water, complex networks and wave patterns...natural phenomena. These visible fields of connective tissue extend well beyond the limits of the stretcher and work in an analogous manner to the patterns of kinship that connect these artists with each other and their country. The painters represented in this exhibition reflect almost a century of accumulated cultural knowledge and experience linked across several generations. Family connections as well as skin relationships are at play. Some of the more direct lineages include those of Djambawa Marawili who is Nonggirnga Marawili's cousin-brother. Nonggirnga is Djutjadjutja Mununggurr's widow and the mother of artist Marrnyula Mununggurr. Jake Tjapaltjarri is the son of George Tjungurrayi while Kenny Williams Tjampitjinpa is the younger brother of Ronnie Tjampitjinpa. Willy Tjungurrayi is the younger brother of Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi and Gloria Petyarre is Ada Bird Petyarre's younger sister.

Painted between 1989 and 1995, the small canvases are miniature explorations in reductive imagery. They demonstrate that the size of the painting is immaterial to the impact it makes. As one would expect the minimalist trend is evident in these small-scale paintings. Uta Uta Tjangala's paintings resemble fragments of much larger works while several tiny canvases by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri show a fascination with the hypnotic line work that has since preoccupied many artists.

The mesmerising Tingari paintings of interconnected concentric circles and squares that characterised the work of Pintupi painters during the last thirty years have been refined, metamorphosing into the optical extravaganzas that visualise the essence of country as a vibration of kinetic energy...energy that is invisible to the naked eye...or, at least to the untrained eye. These do not appear to be narrative paintings although each is derived from a narrative basis that survives by implication. For maximum effect and an outside audience the artists have intentionally placed their emphasis on the visual impact rather than the story in these paintings, rejecting naturalistic and figurative forms. You feel these paintings as well as see them.

The inside meaning of the paintings is a matter for conjecture. From the inception of the expanding central and western desert art movement that began at Papunya in 1971, Pintupi artists continue to explore the depiction of Ancestral stories and episodes from the epic adventures of the Tingari ancestral beings who travelled across the western desert during creation times. The locations where specific events happened and where ancestors camped are linked through songlines and connect people with their country and each other. A parallel situation exists in Arnhem Land where artists have painted their ancestral stories and beliefs for much of the past century.

In the case of the Tingari ancestors detailed information is withheld and consequently little is revealed to outsiders about their specific activities or the subsequent implications. Information that is presently available includes the name of the site and perhaps a brief description of the surrounding country and the activities of the ancestral beings at the site. The concise visual language that is used to portray these sites is an appropriate form to veil restricted information.

The paintings clearly indicate that *Country* evokes an intense emotional experience in the artists who are able to communicate this intensity to the viewer through this style of painting. The variations appear inexhaustible. Equipped with a mnemonic register of designs artists innovate and experiment within the genre producing, as has been so eloquently expressed, these "Bobby Dazzlers".

Ken Watson 2004

[1] Tjukurrpa: Western Desert language word for the Law, sacred knowledge (the Dreaming)

Dr. George (Takata) Tjapaltjarri *Jupiter Well* 1995 acrylic on canvas board 20.3 x 25.4 cm

Helicopter Tjungurrayi *Minyur Rockhole near Jupiter Well, Great Sandy Desert* 1995
acrylic on canvas 60 x 90 cm © Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2004

The Visual Intensity of Contemporary Aboriginal Art

Repetition is an important element in Aboriginal society of the desert. It is a reflection of the vast landscape, with few elements and demanding conditions. The endless sand dunes snake across the land, the spinifex clumps form their dynamic patterns, the concentration of animal tracks around water sources. The rings of a receding waterhole. The cracked surface of a clay pan. All these elements inform the artist.

This is reinforced in the song cycles which impart crucial knowledge about this land while defining history and preparing for the harsh life the desert demands. Ceremonial activity has its part with ground painting and body decoration. Imagine the spectacle of a white body paint design illuminated by a flash of igniting spinifex, the blackened body of the dancer disappearing in the darkness. This visual intensity burns the image into the mind via the retina.

Implements are also spare but even here we find information that informs the contemporary Aboriginal artists. The parallel grooves in a shield, the curves of the ancestral serpent carved in a coolamon, the line of a spear. But artists take this further and the mythic stories that inform contemporary painters do not only take inspiration from literal sources but from a deep spiritual base that gives them meaning.

With this in mind we can view the developing visual language of the Papunya Tula Artists in two strands. One engages a direct narrative that tells a story. The other deals more with the spiritual side and is more like poetry, evoking a mood, an atmosphere. Some of this abstract Aboriginal art developed an optical intensity through the use of line and dot. This intensity was used by the artist to visually empower their canvases. Some, like Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri did this in a subtle way evoking shifting fields with his myriad dots. Others like Ronnie Tjampitjinpa assaulted our senses with strong colours and

Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri was the real pioneer of minimalist canvases. His canvases filled entirely of little dots in a pointillist mirage were an individual leap and an optical delight. His confident and assured hand created a body of subtle but visually compelling works. Their success was a seminal force in this genre.

Ronnie Tjampitjinpa took a different path, a bolder and more emphatic approach. His bands of often strong colour illuminated their subject. His grids of Tingari squares formed a dazzling matrix. Over more than two decades Tjampitjinpa pumped power into his art. Using colour and repeated bands of linear pattern, he used dots, then overlapping dots and finally bold lines to make his mark. The optical intensity of his canvases could be dazzling.

George Tjungurrayi took from both these sources and soon his sinuous lines, in close tonal values, filled the entire canvas, causing the eye to vibrate with similar energy. These works on a large format took on a spiritual serenity that reflected their subject. A spear in flight, quivering and vibrating the air around it, pushed by the elemental force of the wind is captured in these works. They visually transport the viewer.

These major artists set a standard that attracted the attention of their peers in other places. Maxie Tjampitjinpa, a Papunya Tula Artist from Papunya began to develop his own reduced all-over-fields. These began as narratives defined by sites and symbols with a ground of shifting vegetation painted in a stippled affect. Gradually the stippling became the painting and in his *bushfire* series these charged fields capture the shifting flames, the burned black ground and the white ash. These are moody works.

Of course it would be remiss not to acknowledge that one of the driving forces for the success of these optically charged paintings was their apparent links to contemporary abstraction by non-indigenous artists. Certainly this does in part account for their appeal to a broader audience, but it is not the whole story. The real reason these works have been successful is that they are full and resolved paintings in their own right. The artists that made them were able to charge their surfaces with energy that comes from knowing their subject and having the skills and confidence to project it.

These contemporary Aboriginal artists have a body of knowledge to inform their work and the skill to translate that into a visual form that filled their canvas with the power to work on us all, to attract and stimulate our vision. While non-Aboriginal artists often sought to find meaning through their abstract forms, the Aboriginal artist sought to convey the meaning they already held. That these two apparently different perspectives created a similar vision is not so surprising. Both created art that moved the eyes, and the imagination, in a way that made poetic sense of our world.

Christopher Hodges 2004

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LEFT
Djutjadjutja Mununggurr *Untitled Larrakitj* 1998
natural pigments on wood 268 x 24 cm

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THE ARTISTS

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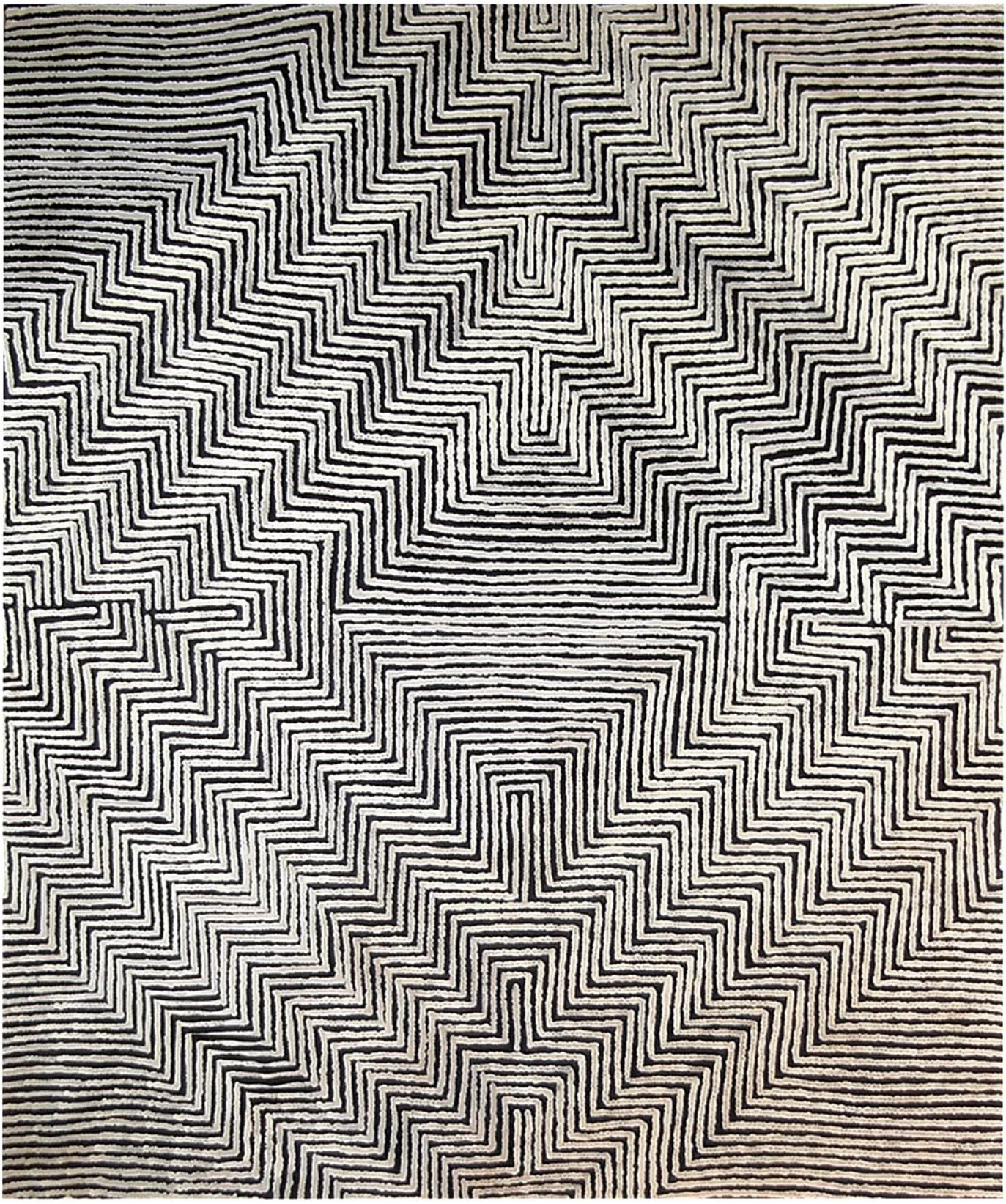
Nonggirrnga Marawili
Djutjadjutja Mununggurr
Elizabeth Marks Nakamarra
Lorna Napanangka
Ada Bird Petyarre
Gloria Petyarre
William Sandy
John Tjakamarra
Tony Tjakamarra
Sam Tjampitjin
Dini Campbell Tjampitjinpa
Jimmy Brown Tjampitjinpa
Kenny Williams Tjampitjinpa
Maxie Tjampitjinpa
Ronnie Tjampitjinpa
George Yapa Tjangala
Johnny Gordon Downs Tjangala
Ray James Tjangala
Uta Uta Tjangala
Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri
Danny Gibson Tjapaltjarri
Dr. George (Takata) Tjapaltjarri
George Tjampu Tjapaltjarri
Jake Tjapaltjarri
Joseph Jurra Tjapaltjarri
Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri
Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri
Charlie Tjapangati
Kanya Tjapangati
Timmy Payungka Tjapangati
Tutuma Tjapangati
Cowboy Dick Tjapanangka
George Tjapanangka
George Tjungurrayi
George Ward Tjungurrayi
Helicopter Tjungurrayi
Paddy Carroll Tjungurrayi
Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi
Willy Tjungurrayi
Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi
Bobby West Tjupurrula
Graham Tjupurrula
John John West Tjupurrula
Johnny Yungut Tjupurrula
Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula
Yalpi Yunupingu

Maxie Tjampitjinpa *Untitled* 1996 acrylic on linen 220 x 183 cm © the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency



Elizabeth Marks Nakamarra *Untitled* 2004 acrylic on linen 180 x 150 cm © the artist, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

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