TEXT **LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW**
PHOTOGRAPHY **STEPHEN OXENBURY**

COLLABORATIONS

WAKARTU CORY SURPRISE & ILDIKO KOVACS

In the first of an on-going series of features about the unique and dynamic collaborative projects between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, Louise Martin-Chew documents the artistic interactions of senior Fitzroy Crossing artist Wakartu Cory Surprise and Sydney-based abstract painter Ildiko Kovacs

In the mark that a sponge leaves on a wall, just as in ever-changing cloud formations, people see whatever they wish to see: configurations of their desires, images from their theatre of life, signs of their cultures.[1]

"Indigenous painting has irrevocably changed the practice of contemporary art in Australia." This declaration – made only a few years ago by Dallas Gold, early in January in the midst of a summer road trip and thousands of kilometres from his Darwin-based gallery – may have seemed excessive at the time. But it is now irrevocably the case. And for every non-Indigenous artist who has spent time in regions with Indigenous painters, there are dozens more who absorb the work as it is shown in the city. They ponder the connections with country, family and identity that seem innately present in these works. Journalist Nicolas Rothwell suggests: "For the past three decades, Aboriginal art has been the key channel bridging traditional and modern Australia, bringing together the cities and the remote world."[2]

Part of the fascination is the strength of the connections that Indigenous artists have with both family and land, and the ancient ownership way beyond the rest of us, who may make no such claim. But for artists there is also the unfailing surety in the process of painting itself: the lack of inhibition, the ability to transcend doubt, to be in the moment, with the paint, and the intrinsic story to be told.

For Sydney-based abstract painter Ildiko Kovacs, whose interest in the work of Indigenous painters (and particularly that of Wakartu Cory Surprise) goes back many years, an opportunity to travel to the community-owned-and-run Mangkaja Arts Centre at Fitzroy Crossing, and work with artists on their own terms, was a long-held dream. She jumped at the chance: within three weeks of the idea being raised last year she arrived one afternoon in spring.

Fitzroy Crossing is not the sort of place to which you travel on a whim. Located in Western Australia, 2500km north of Perth and 400km east of Broome, it is on the floodplains of the Fitzroy River. The population of about 1200 comprises the people of four main language groups – Bunuba, Wangkajunka, Gooniyandi and Walmajarri – drawn from throughout the Fitzroy Valley. It is dramatic country, the vastness of the floodplains difficult to overstate. Close to the jila and jilji (springs and sand dunes) of the Great Sandy Desert, there are eucalypt forests, savannah grasslands and limestone ranges.

Kovacs, who had been to Fitzroy Crossing briefly in 1995, initially found herself sitting back, observing, helping out, and making cups of tea.

"Then," she says, "I took a sheet of paper and began to paint. After a while Dolly Snell said to me 'Can I have your painting?' I gave it to her, and she started painting over it! We stood there, painting together, and it felt natural."

For three weeks Kovacs worked in the art centre, sitting down with Wakartu Cory Surprise, Daisy Andrews and Snell for hours: painting, assisting, suggesting different colours, mixing paint and talking about the work. She talked to the other Fitzroy Crossing-based artists and the young people of the area, and at night made her own paintings. The results of this extraordinary residency were a new vibrancy, particularly in colour, in the work of Wakartu Cory Surprise and a subtle, yet no less significant, shift in Kovacs' paintings.

For Kovacs, this experience cemented a connection with the Kimberleys that she had established while living in Broome in 1996. "It was a great place for her at that time," says Dallas Gold. "Ildiko was exploring her own country and landscape. She is very inspired by Indigenous art, mostly in a formal sense: its structure and looseness and power. Yet she didn't manage to have

LEFT Ildiko Kovacs Orange Glow 2008 acrylic on paper 76 x 56cm
OPPOSITE Ildiko Kovacs in her studio Bundeena NSW 2008

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"I can't bring anything to a painter of the calibre of Cory Surprise. She is an incredible natural painter..."

Ildiko Kovacs

1 Hubert Damisch, A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting, Stanford University Press, California, 2002: p.185
2 Nicolas Rothwell, Another Country, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2007: p.265-266

LEFT Wakartu Cory Surprise
Fitzroy Crossing WA 2008

BELOW LEFT **Wakartu Cory Surprise**
Untitled 2008 acrylic on paper
30 x 60cm

BELOW RIGHT **Wakartu Cory Surprise**
Untitled 2008 acrylic on canvas
30 x 60cm

PORTRAIT STEPHEN OXENBURY | ARTWORK COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MANGKAJA ARTS

that one-on-one encounter with an Indigenous painter, the shared creative exchange over days or weeks, which she desired."

Art centre manager Katie McGuire says that Kovacs' approach was ideal. "The artists got on well with Ildiko. They have a similar way of working and Ildiko knew how to work, intuitively, side-by-side with the artists here. I guess she saw the artists both as her peers and her teachers."

Kovacs agrees. "I can't bring anything to a painter of the calibre of Cory Surprise. She is an incredible natural painter, and mainly I sat with her, assisting. She has a passion for paint and she has her story, that's a given, but she is passionate about the painting. She's also very frail, so instead of getting up to change paints, she might use the same colours over and over. I helped with that. I also took some different paint with me, a matt-style Atelier paint, which they hadn't used before. I thought it would suit some of the artists' work."

McGuire noticed a distinct emotional lift in spirits as a result of Kovacs' presence at Mangkaja. "Cory, usually a solo worker, really enjoyed the companionship," she says. "She has a great sense of humour, although at the same time she's very serious and focused on her work. Ildiko supported her process and her personality. It was beneficial to everyone's practice, and they are still talking about when that Kartiya woman was here."

THE LOCATION

Wakartu Cory Surprise is one of a number of well-known painters from Fitzroy Crossing whose work has been strongly received since the art movement began there under the auspices of the Karrayili Adult Education Centre in 1982. Visual recording of personal histories was a direct result. Initially it was in crayon and pencil on paper, and then with brightly coloured watercolour. Mangkaja Arts was established in 1984 for a group of more than 20 painters. Surprise was part of this group, and her painting career follows her rare and extraordinary life.

She was born in the Great Sandy Desert in 1929. "Me walk out of bush last time ... young woman, me... with my two brothers."[3] Her parents died in the desert, and she married and travelled with her husband, a contract fencer, living on several different stations. She milked goats, worked as a camp cook and a cleaner, and had many children along the way. She came to Fitzroy Crossing in the 1950s but only began painting at Karrayili Adult Education Centre in the early 1980s.

"When I paint, I think about my country and where I have been travelling across that country," says Surprise. "Nobody taught me to paint. I put down my own ideas. I saw these places for myself. I went there with the old people."[4]

Surprise was the recipient of the Work on Paper Award at the Telstra National and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 1997, and has exhibited since the early 1990s in Australia and more recently London (1998) and Singapore (2005).

Ildiko Kovacs was born in Sydney to parents of Hungarian descent. She studied painting at the National Art School in Sydney and has exhibited widely throughout Australia, with solo exhibitions held regularly since 1988. Her work is an abstracted and organic series of developing personal iconography committed to the reality, materiality and integrity of the paint itself. She has developed, over the years, her own process-oriented poetry of visual metaphor. She describes her influences as diverse: "You connect with different artists at different points in your life. When I was younger it was the American expressionists, and then years later I felt a need to identify with my environment and landscape, and that led into my interest in Indigenous art."[5]

3 Wakartu Cory Surprise artist biography, www.raftartspace.com.au
4 Wakartu Cory Surprise artist biography, www.raftartspace.com.au
5 Ildiko Kovacs to the author, 16 January 2009

LEFT Ildiko Kovacs Orange Glow 2008 acrylic on paper 56 x 76cm

RIGHT Wakartu Cory Surprise painting in the Art Centre Fitzroy Crossing WA 2008

PORTRAIT ILDIKO KOVACS | ARTWORK COURTESY THE ARTIST, MANGKAJA ARTS AND RAFT ART SPACE

THE COLLABORATION

There is a real synergy between the work of Kovacs and Surprise – a conversation about colour, abstracted shape and the paint itself – which speaks across cultures, inspirations and generations. In that conversation is a spark that Gold describes as "a bit of magic". It was the result of time spent in an artistic exchange that was as much about process and shared workspace as it was about observation and inspiration.

Gold has noticed a new quality emerging from the interactions between white artists and Indigenous painters: "It goes beyond romanticism. It is more about an understanding of the humour of Indigenous art, which is not just about what we project but so much more. There is a whole other territory. It becomes a dialogue, a celebration of difference in the work."

Every new painting is an act of reinvention. Every painting is the last painting, and the next one is always the first one. [6]

For Kovacs, the impact of the residency on her own work was both intense and powerful: "I came back to Sydney aware that something had shifted inside me. It was a very profound experience to work with painters who walked in from the desert decades ago and are there producing artworks today."

However, the impact was experiential rather than overt. "It was a metaphorical process in a sense, relating to the uninhibited way in which paint is applied by artists like Cory. For her, painting happens without inhibition or self-consciousness as it does in Western painting. She is there, in the moment, whereas we are always trying to shake off those inhibitions."

Kovacs cites words from American composer and artist John Cage to explain this process: "When you start working, everybody is in your studio; the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas. But as you continue to paint, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave." [7]

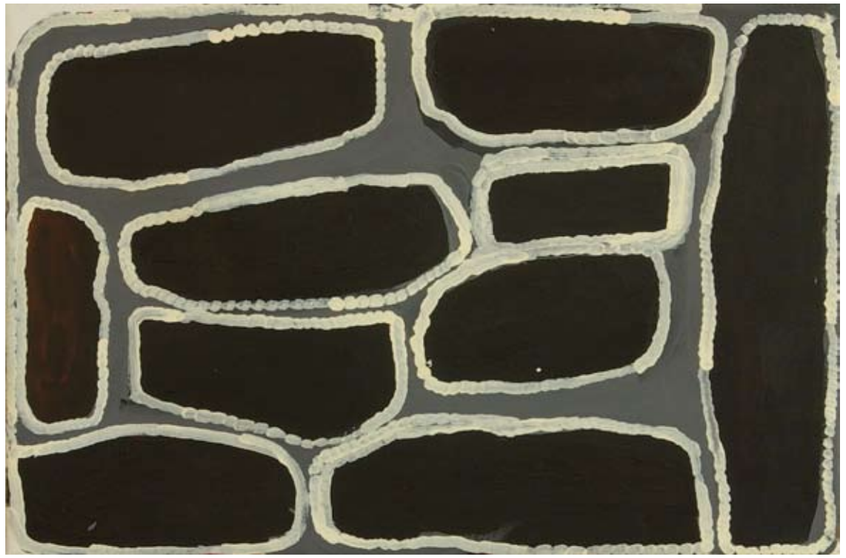
Cory's work, suggests Kovacs, "comes out of reliving her story. She is not trying to make a picture. Our psyches and our intent are very different, but the collaboration for me was observing the way she applied paint, her innate sense of structure and her directness – all in complete harmony with her canvas. It's a kind of naturalness with paint that can only be inspiring. Paint is, after all, about the act and the conversation that lies inside you."

The resulting works juxtapose Surprise's oval shapes, depictions of jilji, jumu (soak water), jila, jiwara (rock hole), pamarr (hills and rock country) and other aspects of her memories of the country delineated in solid colours, often with dotted borders. Kovacs' more organically complex works complement them in the sense of a thick history of memory and metaphor. These works, made at the same time and in the same place, are individual cultural essays that engage each other in conversation. They evoke the words exchanged above them as they were painted. Colour and texture speak across the cultures; signs of each artist's theatre of life writ large for all to see. [8]

6 Andrew Frost, Ildiko Kovacs, May 2005 www.christineabrahamsgallery.com.au
7 Musa Mayer, Night Studio: a Memoir of Philip Guston, Thames & Hudson, 1991: p.71-72
8 Ildiko Kovacs to the author, 15 January 2009

"When I paint, I think about my country and where I have been travelling across that country. Nobody taught me to paint. I put down my own ideas."

Wakartu Cory Surprise



TOP Wakartu Cory Surprise Untitled 2008 acrylic on paper 60 x 90cm
BOTTOM Wakartu Cory Surprise Untitled 2008 acrylic on paper 56 x 76cm
TOP RIGHT Ildiko Kovacs August 2008 acrylic on paper 76 x 56cm
BOTTOM RIGHT Ildiko Kovacs Folded Shade 2008 acrylic on paper 76 x 56cm

ARTWORK COURTESY THE ARTIST, MANGKAJA ARTS AND RAFT ART SPACE

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