

A new exhibition opens this month in Darwin featuring work by four women artists. Although they have entirely different backgrounds - two are Indigenous and two are non-Indigenous - what each artist has in common is a commitment to the medium of paint. Describing the exhibition, curator Dallas Gold says, “If anything, it’s about a common conviction, a need to paint and the sense of humanity that the works by these artists evoke.” In this feature we preview the work of the four artists in the show.

WORDS: Susan McCulloch PORTRAITS: Stephen Oxenbury and Greg Weight

PAINT

Makinti Napanangka covers the canvas in sweeps of buttery tones; under the rich layers of Aida Tomescu’s dense impastos emerge faint outlines of the drawing within; Eubena Nampitjin’s broad brush strokes pulsate with glowing hues; while Ildiko Kovacs’s iconography is spare and arresting.

The quality that links the work of these very different artists is their long commitment to the medium of paint. And their showing together at Darwin’s Raft Artspace is due to a highly personal choice by gallery director Dallas Gold. “The exhibition,” says Gold, “is an exploration into the language of paint of four highly motivated artists whose work has struck a chord with me at different times.”

Gold has honed the broad concept of an exhibition celebrating the quality of paint – a subject so broad that it could easily fill entire galleries – into 16 paintings by only four artists. That all are women, that two are Aboriginal and two European-Australian, is, says Gold, a secondary reason for their choice, although he aims also in the exhibition to cross the Indigenous/non-Indigenous divide. In this the exhibition is not unlike several earlier shows, such as Michael Eather’s 2003 Minimal Fuss exhibition at Fireworks Gallery in Brisbane which featured works by Tony Tuckson, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Minnie Pwerle.

The works in Paint were chosen “intuitively”, says Gold. “I found myself seeking out their work and responding more to it every time I saw it,” he says. Arthur Boyd always found it more

comfortable to be described as a “painter” rather than an “artist”, and it’s the qualities he implied in this – of tactility and love of the medium itself – that is obvious in the works in this show.

Senior artist Eubena Nampitjin is a Kukatja/Wangajungka/Purtitjarra and Mantilytjara woman born around 1921 west of Jupiter Well, deep in the western desert. Nampitjin lived a largely traditional life as a child before settling at the mission at Balgo. A strong and powerful personality, Nampitjin is a marpan (medicine woman and healer) who, with her second husband Wimitiji Tjapangarti (c.1924–2000) assisted the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt in their field research. She was among the first group of artists to paint at Balgo’s fledgling art movement in the 1980s, and was a founding member of that community’s Warlayirti Arts Centre when it was established some years later. Her first paintings contained strong iconography similar to that of Tjapangarti’s work – with whom she would frequently paint collaboratively – with multiple layers of dotting finely applied with wooden skewers. Nampitjin’s joyous use of colour – particularly reds and yellows, applied separately or combined in various shades of orange – was as immediately evident as her mastery of technique. A deliberate shift in the paintings occurred around 1994 when she abandoned the skewers for brushes. The works became more expansive, and a more painterly style developed. Reds, yellows, oranges and pinks remained her signature colours, and a particularly glowing canvas won her the Open

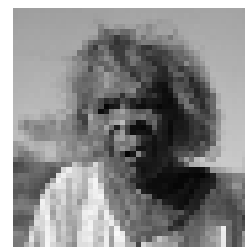
Painting Award at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 1998.

Yet, for Gold, it was far from “love at first sight” with Eubena’s work. “I rang the arts centre one day around 2001,” he says. “I’d been moved by the paintings of Susie Bootja Bootja but didn’t especially respond to Eubena’s work. The manager of Warlayirti at the time, Erica Izett, was especially close to Eubena and she said ‘Just talk to her’. So I did, on the phone. I had no idea what she was saying, as she was speaking in language, but the rhythm and her undulating tone was completely seductive.”

It’s this rhythmic quality that Gold finally responded to several years later when Raft Artspace showed one of Nampitjin’s works with those of the younger and highly popular fellow Balgo artist Elizabeth Nyumi. “We built a special wall to show Eubena’s 180 x 150cm work, and it came to emit an authority over the whole place,” recalls Gold. “I found it a very powerful work. It evoked both an intimate knowledge of country and contemporary painting.”

This work – with its rich whites, pinks and reds – is featured in the exhibition as a masterly and vibrant example of Nampitjin’s abilities as both an iconographic and expressive painter.

Sharing a similar sense of rhythm, but with a very different palette and style, are the paintings of Makinti Napanangka, a Pintupi woman born around 1930 in the Lake McDonald region, near Kintore, in the Northern Territory. Napanangka began painting with the Haasts Bluff-Kintore project in 1994, and for Papunya Tula Artists in



MAKINTI NAPANANGKA EUBENA NAMPITJIN ILDIKO KOVACS AIDA TOMESCU

1996. A leading artist among contemporary Pintupi women painters, her paintings are often those of the designs associated with the travels of Kungka Kutjarra (Two Women), one of the most prevalent western desert women’s stories. Her recent works are noted for their subtle palette of golden yellows and soft pinks and purples, with lines depicting tracks and the hair-string skirts worn by women during ceremonies associated with the Kungka Kutjarra. The exhibition’s four works by Napanangka include two paintings in which the lines are clearly and confidently placed, and two with a looser, painterly quality.

“Makinti’s work has a similar sensuous quality to Eubena’s,” says Gold. “Her marks have lots of nuance showing total commitment and passion – an elusive magic, not in every work, as her age is making her vision impaired. But on a good day the paint becomes the language – the marks are loose but they convey passion and a deep reverence of process.”

In a completely different vein are the distinctive paintings of 46-year-old Sydney-born painter Ildiko Kovacs. She is known for her own particular use of line and space, with layered grounds of what appear at first to be a single colour, but which are more often built up from overlays of many shades. These works are fine examples of the term “drawing in paint” with simple, often unbroken lines creating a pattern of gentle, mesmeric rhythm inspired by a multitude of symbols, from important cultural designs to roadwork signs. The lines in her most recent paintings, however, have begun to be subsumed within a broader

brush stroke, and fields of sumptuous colour are allowed to come to the fore.

Saturated in their dense layers, and crackling with painterly intensity, the works of Romanian-born Aida Tomescu incorporate her whole artistic development – from her collages of painted fabric on canvas in the ‘70s to her passionate commitment to the medium of paint from the ‘80s onwards. Reflecting the history of art, and therefore painting through the eras, the breadth of Tomescu’s work is illustrated by the diverse range of art prizes she has won over the years: the Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Sulman prize for genre painting (1996), the Wynne Prize for landscape (2001) and the Dobell Prize for Drawing (2003). There is a quality both ancient and entirely contemporary about Tomescu’s abstract paintings: they can appear as spontaneous acts and a simple love of paint, but distilled in these densely-layered and deeply personal works is an extensive, ongoing and study of the history of art.

Smokey tones and large blocks of colour may allude to the elements of fire, earth and air, but – as the artist explains – she is also aiming for a state of tension and “something that is saturated, that is on the threshold, both full of itself and imminently productive of something else. There is a lot of drawing in the underlayers, a lot of nuance, a lot of energy which is both manifest and latent. It comes out of this history, which obviously involves the development of abstraction.”

“Abstraction” could be seen by some as the link between the works of the four very different

artists in this exhibition. But this, of course, is a highly superficial reading of both the paintings and the exhibition itself. “I don’t believe Aboriginal art is ‘abstraction’ in the western art sense, and I don’t want that to be seen as the unifying factor in this exhibition,” says Gold. “If anything, it’s about a common conviction, a need to paint and the sense of humanity that the works by these artists evoke.”

This interest in combining the works of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous art was in fact the initial driving force behind the formation of Raft Artspace. “The idea started in 2000,” says Gold. “I wanted a place to show the work of two very different painters – Peter Adsett and the Gija artist Rusty Peters – who had been working on a discourse in paintings, Two Laws, One Big Spirit. I thought it was a very important body of work. In some ways this exhibition [Paint] is a continuation and celebration of difference.”

(The exhibition is also something of tribute to the person whose life and art inspired the name of the gallery itself – the painter Ian Fairweather, who famously made a solo journey on a home-made raft from Darwin in 1952.)

“I’m not wanting to project or predict anything that may happen in this show,” says Gold. “I see myself as playing the catalyst, bringing works together by four highly motivated artists with different backgrounds who have a strong commitment to the material of paint. I’m inviting people to look at the work, and see what dialogue ensues...”

Exhibition: Paint, Raft Artspace, Darwin, 6–28 Jun



Image courtesy the artist and Liverpool Street Gallery

Opposite: Aida Tomescu (2008). Portrait by Stephen Oxenbury
Above: **Paroi II** (2007), oil on wood panel, 80 x 61cm

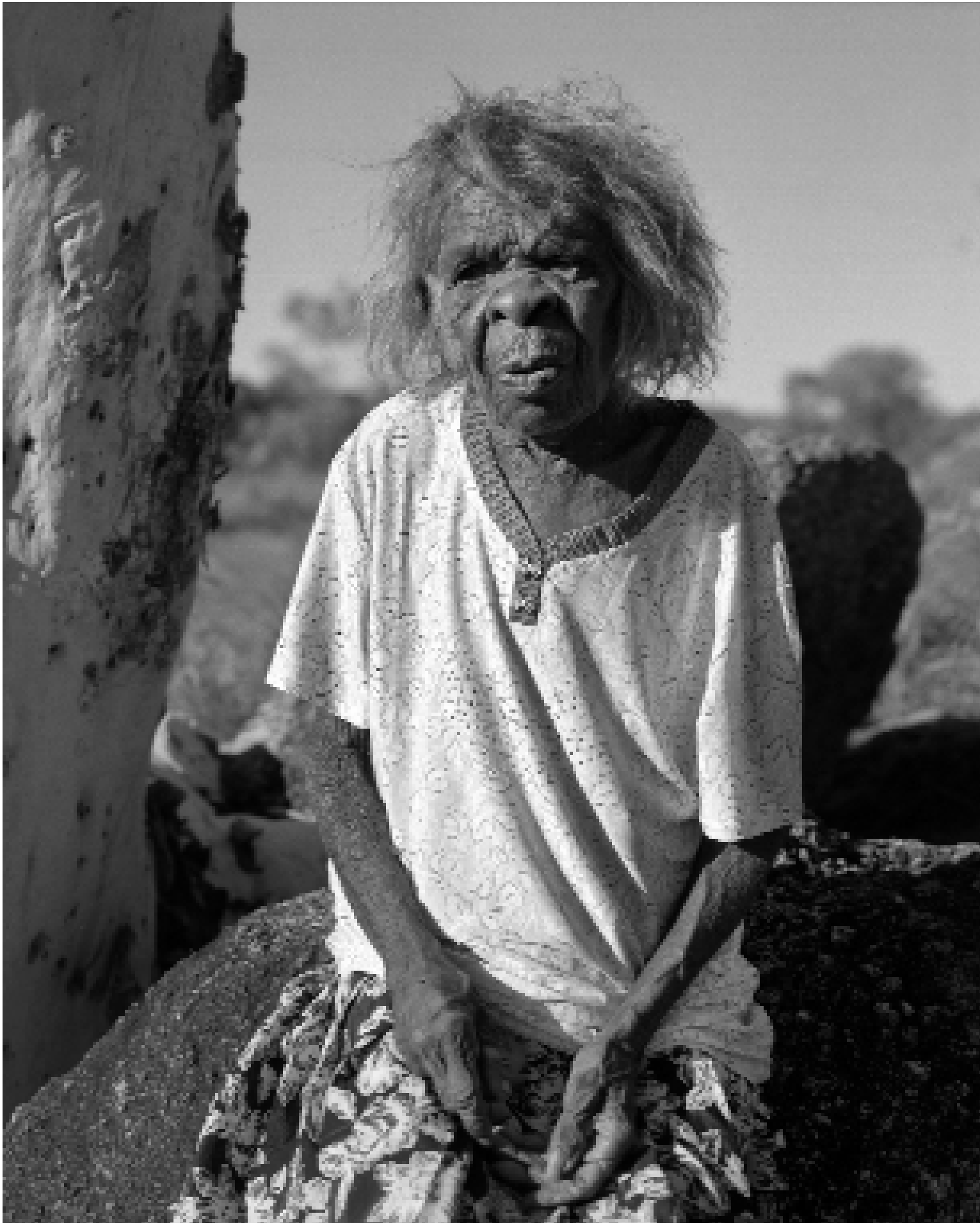


Photo: Greg Weight, for a forthcoming book on artists from the Western Desert



Image courtesy the artist, Papunya Tula Artists and RAFT Artspace

Opposite: Makinti Napanangka (2007). Portrait by Greg Weight
Above: **Untitled** (2003), acrylic on Belgian linen, 137 x 91cm



Image courtesy the artist and Martin Browne Fine Art

Opposite: Ildiko Kovacs (2008). Portrait by Stephen Oxenbury
Above: **Moving Through** (2008), oil on plywood, 170 x 118cm



Photo: Greg Weight, for a forthcoming book on artists from the Western Desert



Image courtesy the artist and Walayiri Artists

Opposite: Eubena Nampitjin (2008). Portrait by Greg Weight
Above: **Midjul**, acrylic on Belgian linen, 150 x 75cm