

1-1-2010

The force of Dreaming: Review of 'Once Upon a Time in Papunya' by Vivien Johnson

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McLean, Ian A.: The force of Dreaming: Review of 'Once Upon a Time in Papunya' by Vivien Johnson 2010, 41-42.
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Vivien Johnson: Once Upon a Time in Papunya

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The force of Dreaming

Ian McLean

ONCE UPON A TIME IN PAPUNYA

by Vivien Johnson

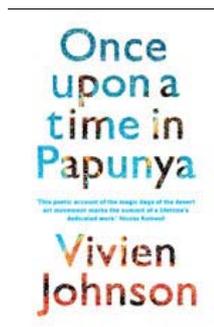
New South, \$34.95 pb, 400 pp, 9781742230078

The most widely known story of Australian art is about the beginnings of Papunya Tula. It has, says Vivien Johnson, been 'retold so often that it almost has the force of Dreaming'. Its force is not just due to the story's frequent telling, but also to the crime with which it begins, which was the making of prohibited images.

Idolatry seems more an Old Testament crime than a modern one, but in this case and these post-colonial times it recalls the disturbing power of patricide or, more explicitly, the Freudian ritual murder of the father. Some even say that an ancient religion was sacrificed on the altar of contemporary art. Befitting the transgression of a taboo, the crime reverberates to this day, as if it is the secret of the art's uncanny authority. It has become a kind of brand that continues to sell the art and to drive up the market value of these first paintings. If there is a return of the repressed in contemporary art, this surely is it. No wonder Johnson feels compelled to write a book about the mysterious origin of Papunya Tula and its impact on the art market.

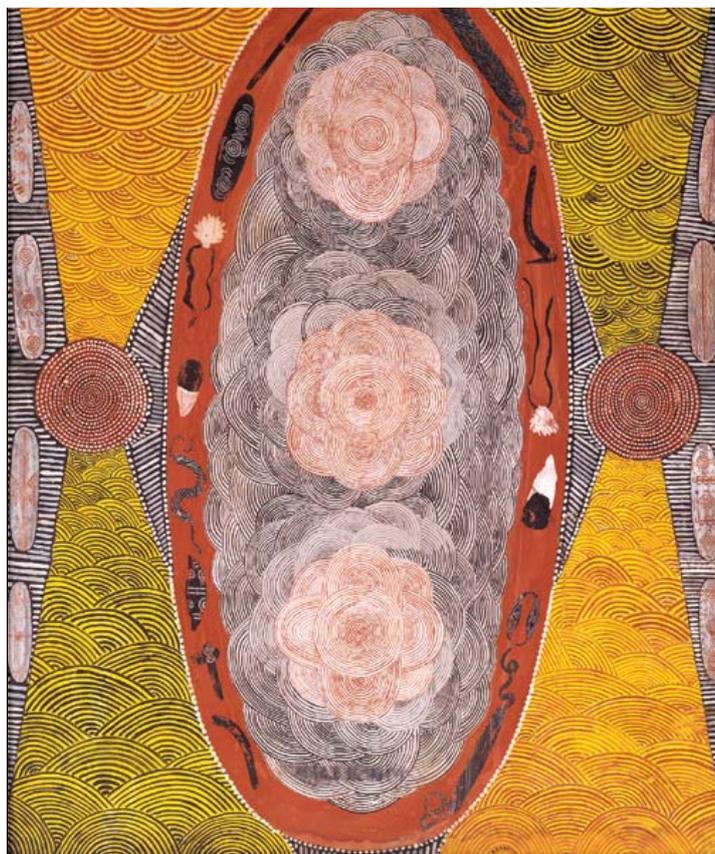
Johnson justifies yet another revisiting of the crime with the promise of solving it. Her plan, typical of most quests to demythologise, is to play the 'detective gathering and sifting the evidence ... relying wherever possible on the facts to unravel the mystery of the origins of these early works'. Johnson is well placed (she knows the terrain better than anyone), and true to her word. The first chapters set the tone. Johnson sticks to the facts, turning up some important discoveries and debunking several well-established myths along the way. Later chapters follow the trail to the art market, but here the trail runs cold. If this seems another story that for all its fetishism lacks mystery and is perfectly explicable, Johnson's doggedness is unwavering throughout. So forensic, inquisitorial and backtracking is her analysis that this reader needed to reread the first chapters just to stay on the trail. This can be frustrating, and often the book reads more like a diary, a chronology of her detective work, rather than a deeper reflection on, and wider examination of, the art movement. However, there is reason in her madness. Johnson patiently teaches us that a surfeit of facts is the perfect cover for a crime. Three hundred pages later, the mystery remains and we are back at the beginning: to a story that has the force of Dreaming.

Ostensibly about the early Papunya boards, in reality this book is about Johnson's detective work, her commitments and principles. Johnson usually writes in a highly personal committed style, but here she does so self-consciously, as if wanting to fulfil the Kantian axiom that all knowledge is subjective. And in Kantian fashion, her search to unravel the mystery metamorphoses into a metaphysical quest for the nature of knowledge itself – of what can and cannot be known. As if slipping between parallel dimensions, the book moves between a detective story and a tract on modernist epistemology that deliberately refuses objectivity and foregrounds the subjectivity and temporality of all knowledge. Johnson emphasises this her account of both her own and other people's. While we hear many other voices, many of which will be obscure to the more casual observer of the art movement, they are heard through Johnson's ear. This is particularly so with indigenous interlocutors, who often speak in riddles that Johnson must translate. Thus her principled desire to be true to the artists' intentions is paradoxically compromised by her equally principled desire for authenticity. If, on the one hand, the large range of voices adds an unusual richness to this account of Papunya Tula's origins, on the other hand the book's horizon is deliberately constrained by Johnson's first-person perspective. The many other voices provide a highly textured story, but the effect is bewildering. Rather than achieving a greater objectivity, this is a type of cubist account that leaves the reader searching for a point from which to get a clear view.



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Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Honey Ant Ceremony*, 1972, synthetic polymer paint on board, 104 x 81.4 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Estate of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri 2010, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency

In short, Johnson's first-person account traps us in the web that she inexorably weaves. For while Johnson appears the most judicial of detectives, weighing up all the options, the more she uncovers the more confusing it appears. The only consolation is the sage but here ironic homily, revealed Solomon-like at the end of the final chapter: 'Whereof one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence.' This is as close as this middle of a book ever gets to Nicholas Rothwell's exhortation on the front cover that Johnson gives us a 'poetic account of the magic days of the desert art movement'.

By the end of the book, I could only draw one conclusion, which is Johnson's complicity with the artists. She is with them, and her muddling has a deliberate purpose. It leads the reader towards another truth: that the transgressors are not criminals but heroes. This is a Creation story about Ancestral Heroes. Dreaming stories, like the biblical story that echoes in Bardon's account, often intermingle creation and transgression. In also using these themes, Johnson imbues her story with the force of myth, signalled in the title: *Once Upon a Time in Papunya*. Yet this mythic account strangely lacks poetry. It does not (like Bardon's accounts) deepen the mystery, as poetry should, but obscures it.

Nor does this book pass as art history. Little attention is paid to the art world and its discourse, which these boards so thoroughly challenged. While Johnson does a good job of sorting through the boards, there is scant attention to what style and other formal concerns (which preoccupy art historians) might reveal – as, for example, is found in Roger Benjamin's essay in the catalogue for *Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya* (2009) – the recent exhibition of early Papunya paintings in the United States. Indeed, it might seem that Johnson deliberately goes out of her way to avoid art historians, preferring the art market to the academic art world. While we meet a large cast of players, art historians are very thin on the ground. However, in this Johnson merely reflects a sad truth: that art historians have contributed little to the study of Papunya Tula.

Once Upon a Time in Papunya might be read as a challenge to art historiography, which is yet to properly account for the Aboriginal contemporary art movement. But whatever its achievement, it remains a book in search of a genre. Johnson's underlying principle is to give voice to the artists' intentions – what art historians dismiss as the intentional fallacy. However, as this book demonstrates, Johnson is no patsy. Like their paintings, the artist's intentions as revealed in their words and actions are so layered and contradictory that perhaps only a good storyteller can get their measure. Certainly, Johnson is a good storyteller. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, she has not isolated herself from her story, but convinces the listener that she has experienced it directly, and that in her telling they too have experienced it. Just consider her short, riveting contribution in *Icons of the Desert*. Perhaps only the genre of storytelling can do justice to the early history of Papunya Tula.

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Ian McLean



Ian McLean is Professor of Australian Art History at the University of Wollongong. He has published extensively on Australian art and particularly Aboriginal art. His books include *White Aborigines Identity Politics in Australian Art and Art of Gordon Bennett* (with a chapter by Gordon Bennett), and *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* is due to be released in August this year. He is also on the advisory boards of Third Text, the international journal of postcolonial art, World Art and National Identities.

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