

# TIME

## Papunya to **PARIS**

How the world's most ancient  
artistic tradition found a home  
in the heart of Western culture

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD



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Arnhem Land artist  
John Mawurndjul,  
Paris, Sept. 2005



**O**N CYCLONE WATCH AT Gunyungarra, Gulumbu Yunupingu speaks gently into her mobile phone: "We're waiting on Cyclone Monica. Coming this way." It's late April in Northeast Arnhem Land, in Australia's Top End, and until the rains came, Yunupingu, an expert in art and bush medicine, had been foraging for yam. Now, as well as the category five storm to worry about, there's her exhibition debut in Paris looming on the horizon, and the mother of four has returned to her community near Yirrkala to paint. As it transpires, over the course of the next few days Monica manages to sidestep Yirrkala, hitting the coast 300 km west at Maningrida, but what begins to form on Yunupingu's bark canvas bound for France has some of its meteorological power. Here the artist's field of shimmering stars mass into high-pressure spirals, drawing the viewer into the eye of her creative storm.

Yunupingu, like the Aboriginal art movement that spawned her, is a force of nature. Arriving late to painting, the 59-year-old spent a lifetime listening to the stories of her father, the distinguished artist Mungguruwuy, helping to translate the Bible into the local Gumatj language, and assisting brother Mandawuy, lead singer of the band Yothu Yindi, to organize the annual celebration of Yolngu culture, Garma, before picking up the brush just six years ago. What her father told her came spilling out in a painted universe of stars, *gan'yumirri garak*, and from next month her work will help guide international audiences through a new era of Aboriginal art at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Across 250 sq m of ceiling, her painted mural will transform a curatorial library into an Arnhem Land night, luminous with a different kind of knowledge. "The stars tell stories to Yolngu people," she says.

Yunupingu's ceiling is not unlike Aboriginal art itself: a universe of independent but interconnecting movements, each adding luster to the other. With the June 23 opening of the MQB, President Chirac's \$278-million monument to non-Western cultures next to the Eiffel Tower on the Seine, the stars would seem to be aligned for Aboriginal art. Yunupingu was one of eight indigenous Australian artists invited to create work for the museum—not to hang on its walls, but rather to be woven through the fabric of Jean Nouvel's visionary architecture. For indigenous art curators Hetti

**YIRRKALA, MON AMOUR** With its gold-dusted stars, Yunupingu's celestial universe, *gan'yumirri garak*, spills into the Paris street

# A PARISIAN ROMANCE

After thousands of years of Dreaming, Australian Aboriginal art arrives in the capital of Western culture **BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD**



**THE GAME** Nouvel's idea was for the architecture to gradually reveal the art within. "It's a structural frame for the artworks," says curator Perkins

Perkins and Brenda Croft, it was a chance to define something that has remained by its very essence indefinable.

From its beginnings on cave walls at least 20,000 years ago, Aboriginal art has continually shifted shape like the rainbow serpent Ngalyod, the culture's enduring creation figure: from the X-ray styles of ancient Arnhem Land to colonial-era paintings on bark; from Albert Namatjira's mid-century watercolors at Hermannsburg to the contemporary cultural renaissance that is the Western Desert Art Movement, and its fertile offspring. Recently described by former Aboriginal Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone as "Australia's greatest cultural treasure," it is an industry conservatively worth \$A200 million a year (*see following story*). But its complexity and dynamism have avoided capture. "It's a paradox," says Perkins. "It's the oldest continuous cultural tradition in the world as well as one of the most exciting contempo-

rary art movements that we'll ever see."

Who better to put paradox into concrete form than architect Nouvel? The light-sensitive façade of his best-known building, the Institut du Monde Arabe, both veils and reveals the culture within, and for the MQB, it was his idea to hand over the administrative wing to the left of the museum's main entrance as a blank canvas for the Australian artists. While the building functions as a bookshop, curatorial offices and library, it was also Nouvel's idea for it to be viewed as a 3D artwork from the street. Every available window, wall, ceiling and column was seen as a potential creative site for the eight artists selected, each embodying a different region of Aboriginal culture (*see map*). With ambitions far outstripping its \$A1.4 million budget, the Australian Indigenous Art Commission was to re-imagine Aboriginal art 20,000 km from its source. "The result," says MQB's chairman and managing director Stéphane Martin,

"will be one of the major displays of Australian art outside of your country."

And all the more surprising considering much of it was fine-tuned from a modest warehouse in Sydney's inner-west. "It's the nervous center at the moment," jokes Australian architect Peter Lonergan, the commission's project manager, who for the past year has employed up to 10 scenic painters, enamel firers and glass cutters to bring the artists' dreams to reality. Late last month, *TIME* was given an exclusive preview of the work in its final stages before being freighted off to Paris for installation. With 2,500 sq m of public art, "every square millimeter involves a number of really intense processes that have to be perfect," says Lonergan. Just as fine have been the cultural calibrations of the project. In working with the artists, Perkins and Croft have had to traverse the country by plane, 4WD and e-mail, signing off on designs while negotiating sensitive copyright issues with

Paris; in one case, an artist's contract couldn't be signed until the floodwaters had receded from her remote community. "It's not only a cross-nation collaboration," says Perkins. "It's inter-cultural as well, and then also between the strands of architecture, curatorship and the arts." Not to mention language. English and French were easy compared to Kuninjku, Gumatj, Gija, Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi, Wiradjuri and Waanyi, all of which buttress this cross-cultural cathedral.

Walking away from the Seine and left into Rue de l'Université, the AIAC creates a subtle impression at first. The grey building tones into the area's fin-de-siecle streetscape, until you discern the scarification marks sandblasted onto the façade. Then looking up, you begin to make out the painted ceilings inside; Yunupingu's stars flash. "It's something that you discover slowly, little by little," explains MQB deputy director Philippe Peltier, a member of the AIAC's curatorial team. "You really have to read the building and the pieces inside it."

Encoded in the architecture is the unfolding history of Aboriginal art. Peltier suspects Europeans will be surprised by the scale of the work in and around the building, but as Perkins points out, it takes the art back to

its genesis: "Where do bark paintings start? Inside bark shelters, inside houses. They were painted on the roof. Rock art. This idea of working on that scale with that kind of prominence is not a new thing." While the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming "forces one to think differently, and in a less linear way, about the relationship between creativity and form in art," as anthropologist Howard Morphy wrote, a natural entry point for the building is the bark painting tradition of Arnhem Land.

It was after visiting Oenpelli in 1912 that anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, noticing ocher-drawn designs in the bark shelters of the Gagadju people, made the first commission of Aboriginal art. Painted on a small rectangular piece of stringybark by a now unknown artist, the white ibis was depicted in the X-ray style expressed in rock art for thousands of years. Bound for the then National Museum of Victoria, Aboriginal art made its first serious impression on Western eyes. Fifty years later, the people of Yirrkala revived the tradition for a historic land claim in Australia's federal parliament, with the so-called "bark petition"; one of its authors was

**SCARRED AND SACRED** Nyadbi's spearhead designs float across the façade; Napurrula's desert landscape hovers over offices, below

Yunupingu's father, Munggurruwuy. In humble ocher on bark, it demonstrated Aboriginal art's importance as a cultural document, and its power to change lives.

More than anyone else, John Mawurndjul has changed the face of bark painting. Adapting the cross-hatch technique of body painting known as *rarrk*, the son of a shaman's



STEPHEN HUGH FOR TIME



© MUSEE DU QUAI BRANLY, PARIS - PHOTO YVES BELLIER

# Where the Artists Live and Dream

ALISTAIR MILLER (2) AND COURTESY MANINGRIDA ARTS AND CULTURE, NORTHERN TERRITORY



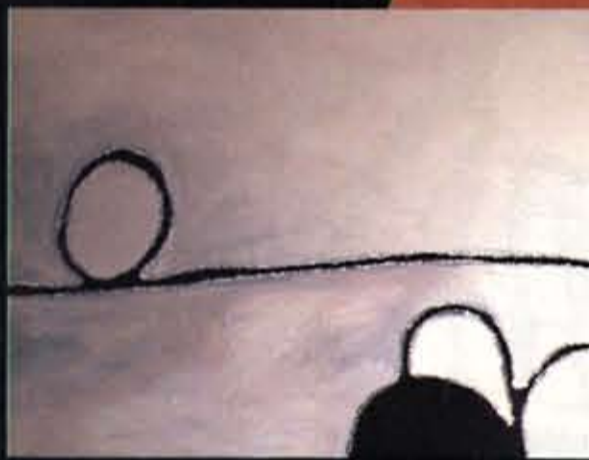
**JOHN MAWURNDJUL** The Kuninjku master of *rarrk* expands his usual bark canvas to a 150 sq-m "moving" ceiling above the ground-floor shop



PORTRAIT - PETER ELLIOTT AND COURTESY JIBRAWUN ARTS, WESTERN AUSTRALIA; PHOTO OF ARTWORK - JIBRAWUN ARTS, WESTERN AUSTRALIA



**PADDY NYUNKUNY BEDFORD** The Gija man mines a life of cattle droving with his East Kimberley landscape, to be placed along a Paris corridor



PORTRAIT COURTESY WARMUN ART CENTRE, WESTERN AUSTRALIA; PHOTO OF ARTWORK - ALISTAIR MILLER



**LENA NYADBI** The Gija woman is inspired by the *jimbala* spearheads of her father's country, which are transposed across the building's main façade



**TOMMY WATSON** The Pitjantjatjara man's rockhole will be enamel-fired across a third-storey ceiling, evoking the hot wind off the Western Desert



PORTRAIT COURTESY IRRUNYTIJJI ARTS, WESTERN AUSTRALIA; PHOTO OF ARTWORK - GREG WEIGHT



**NINGURA NAPURRULA** The Pintupi painter's ceremonial site near Kiwirrkura will swirl above curatorial office spaces on the building's first floor



PORTRAIT COURTESY PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS, NORTHERN TERRITORY; PHOTO OF ARTWORK - ALISTAIR MILLER



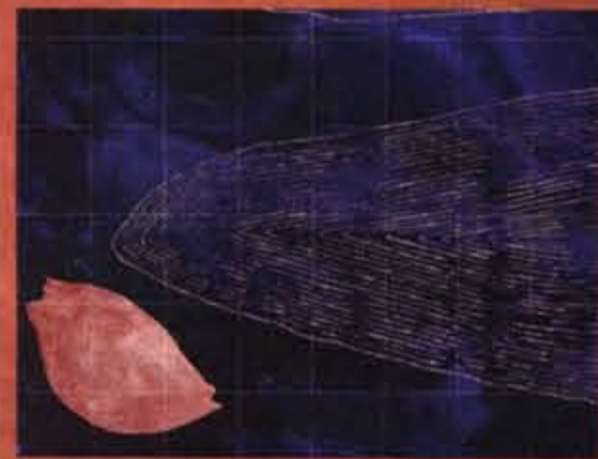
**GULUMBU YUNUPINGU** The Gumatj painter from Yirrkala suspends a second-floor media room in the darkness and light of an Arnhem Land night



PORTRAIT COURTESY BUKU-LARRINGGAY MURKA CENTRE, YIRRKALA, NORTHERN TERRITORY; PHOTO OF ARTWORK - ALISTAIR MILLER



**JUDY WATSON** The city-based artist draws on her Waanyi heritage in such work as *two halves with bailer shell*, illuminated across a ground-floor ceiling



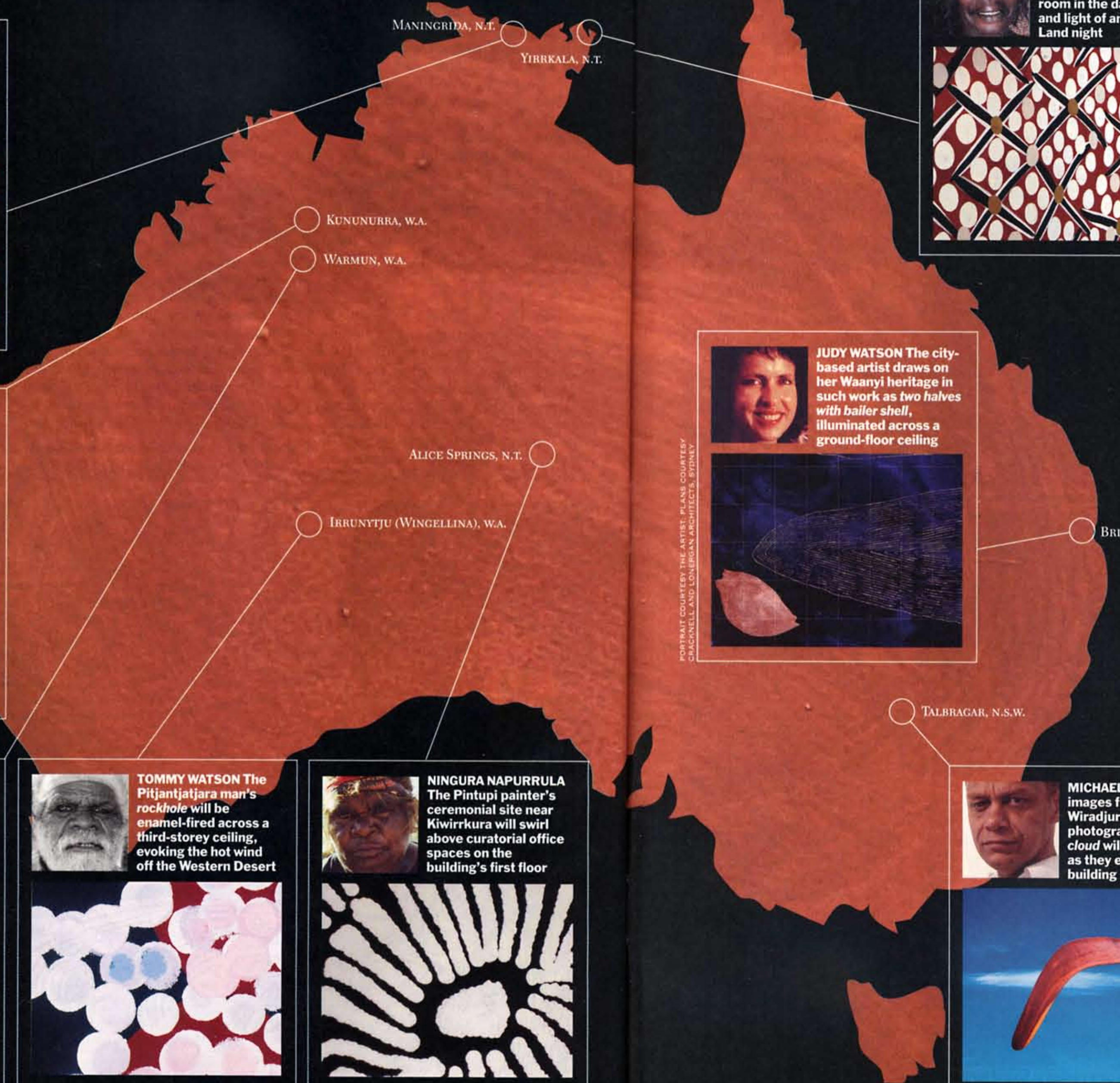
PORTRAIT COURTESY THE ARTIST; PLANS COURTESY CHACKWELL AND LONERGAN ARCHITECTS, SYDNEY



**MICHAEL RILEY** Poetic images from the late Wiradjuri filmmaker's photographic series *cloud* will greet people as they enter the building



PORTRAIT COURTESY MICHAEL RILEY; ARTWORK © MICHAEL RILEY, LICENSED BY VISCOPIV, AUSTRALIA, 2006



increasingly virtuoso barks have taken what was previously seen as a craft to the exalted realm of fine art: last year, he was accorded a career retrospective at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. If Mawurndjul is considered the Michelangelo of *rarrk*, then the MQB is his Sistine Chapel. Across 150 sq m of ground-floor ceiling, his sacred billabong at Milmilngkan ripples and sings; the *rarrk*'s kinetic power suggesting the presence of Ngalyod. Nearby, his painted hollow-log column appears to bear the weight of the building. Mawurndjul visited Paris last September to hand-paint his *lorrkkon* log and supervise the ceiling work, joining his artisans on the scaffolding. "His eye followed every single line as it was painted," recalls Lonergan.

Collaboration is the cornerstone of Aboriginal art practice, and nowhere was this more apparent than at Papunya, 250 dirt kilometers west of Alice Springs. Around the same time as the Yirrkala people were presenting their bark petition to parliament, hundreds of desert nomads were gathering at the settlement as part of the government's assimilation policy. Far from their Pintupi, Arrernte, Warlpiri and Luritja homelands, the Papunya mob were caught in "the agony of exile," Perkins has written. Driving his VW into town in 1971, Sydney art teacher Geoffrey Bardon wasn't thinking of starting a revolution. But by encouraging the town's senior men to paint their ceremonial sand designs onto the local school wall, an artistic one was unleashed. In a series of concentric circles and squiggles, their Honey Ant Meeting Place ("Papunya Tula" in Pintupi) was conjured up, and one of the most extraordinary art movements of the 20th century had begun.

Not only did the movement's founding fathers summon up their far-flung homelands in paint, but they would return to them by decade's end, setting up outstations at places like Kintore and Kiwirrkura near the Western Australian border. Their signature dotted style not only dazzled the art market but also kept their sacred stories screened, in the process producing "masterpieces of ambiguity, equivocation and disguise," cultural theorist Paul Carter has written. By the mid-'90s, as the senior men began to pass away, their wives and daughters took up the brush, releasing a second wave of artists. Nearing 70, Ningura Napurrula's work bears the hallmarks of the latest style, with thick impasto not unlike ceremonial body painting. Across her first-floor ceiling in Paris, black and white forms cartwheel through space. Employing Napurrula's usual technique, artisans prepared a ground-cover of ochre-like red, over which they traced the artist's design of a sacred site near Kiwirrkura; infilling the rest with daubs of

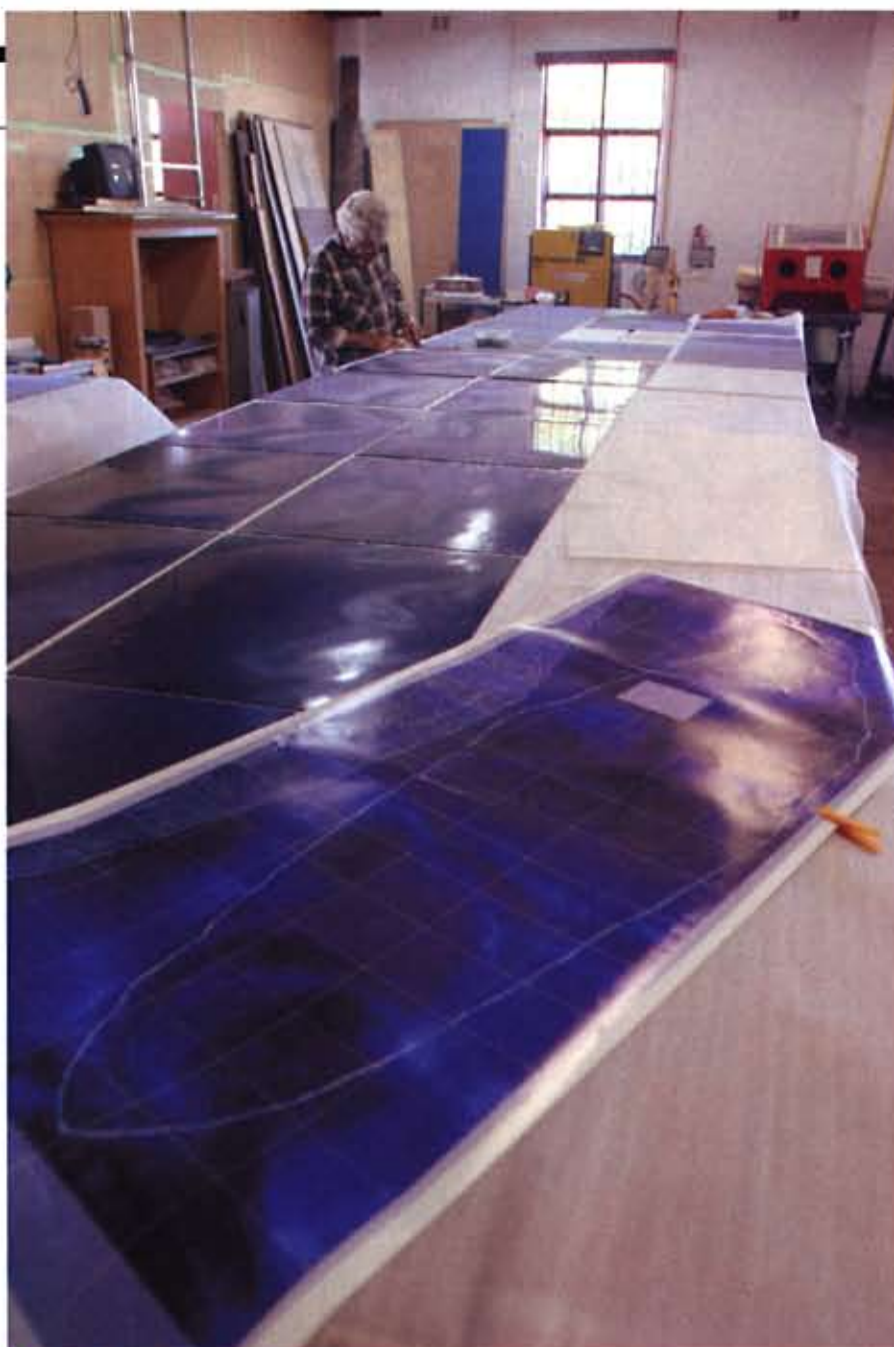
white. In this way, the blood and bones of her country are laid bare.

Like desert flowers after the rain, Papunya also inspired a new blossoming of art centers across the border into South Australia. As a founder of Irrunytju Arts, Tommy Watson, a Pitjantjatjara man in his late 60s, is one of the new kids on the block. But with the eye-popping palette of his enamel-fired ceiling—which depicts a rock hole in his grandfather's country in a blaze of hot pink, green and red—we see the full bloom of the Western Desert three storeys above a Paris street.

In 1974, the year Papunya's Honey Ant mural was casually whitewashed over, Rover Thomas experienced a series of dreams at Warmun, 1,000 km northwest in the East Kimberley's diamond country. An old woman had recently died, and in his dreams her spirit flew eastward, encountering the land and its sacred sites. Former stockman Thomas' visions were later recorded on boards and held aloft during a ceremony known as *Gurrir Gurrir*. These boards grew into a contemporary art movement, made famous by the late Thomas' Rothko-like swathes of ocher necklaced by sun-bursting dots (in 2001, his *All That Big Rain Coming Down from Top Side* was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia for \$A786,625, still a record for an Aboriginal work).

With their tactile, outside view of country, it's fitting that Thomas' successors adorn the front of the Australian building. Painted to the left of the front doors is Paddy Bedford's *Thoowoongoonarrin*, the former stockman's maternal homeland. In tones of blue-black and pinky-white, his diamond-sharp eye excavates the land from above. Raised in relief across three storeys of the façade above are the *jimbala* spearheads of Lena Nyadbi's paternal country. These spearheads were also used to tattoo the skin of young initiates, and even from oceans away, the architects could feel the artist's hand marking the project. "She was driving it completely from a long distance," says Lonergan.

Greeting the viewers as they enter the building are the large-scale photos of Michael Riley. The late Dubbo-born artist and filmmaker recalled growing up in central New



**LIQUID SKY** Watson calls her ceiling "the color of memory"



**SONG LINES** Watson's design is sand-blasted into the glass



**CULTURAL CARGO** Tommy Watson's ceiling is boxed for Paris

South Wales, "lying down in the front yard looking up at telegraph poles and lines... cutting through the clouds." Made four years before his death, his final photo series *cloud* (2000) recaptures that view, though what float across the sky are poetic symbols of Aboriginal dispossession: European farm animals and vestiges of Christianity; even the boomerang returns to him as a weapon of racial stereotyping, beautiful but deadly. Riley was a child of the '80s urban-based Aboriginal movement, when art school-educated indigenous Australians like Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett began using the tricks of Postmodernism to critique Australia's colonial past.

Judy Watson was another. And around to the left of *cloud* will be the artist's 11-m-long glass ceiling, inspired by her painting *two halves with bailer shell*, 2002, in the NGA collection. Floating in a glassy sea of Prussian and ultramarine blue, the sand-blasted image is deceptively beautiful: the Aboriginal bailer shell was drawn from a collection at the British Museum where a friend of Watson's was working last decade, and her work is about the sometimes painful process of cultural retrieval. Watson, 46, who traces her lineage to the Waanyi country of northwest Queensland, calls her blue "the liquid color of dreams." In this case bittersweet ones, for Watson's work expresses the disquiet indigenous Australians can feel in seeing their ancient artefacts in foreign collections. Acid-etched across the front window, the artist's *museum piece* seeks to challenge "the ethnographic perceptions of Aboriginal culture and traditions," says Watson. "The more that our presence is felt, and the more that people experience and meet with indigenous people on their ground, the more that those perceptions are going to be squashed."

Indeed, squashing the usual perceptions about Aboriginal art has been the life mission of Croft and Perkins, senior curators at the NGA and Art Gallery of N.S.W. respectively. As founding members of Sydney's Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in 1987, they mixed art with activism (Perkins is the daughter of famed campaigner Charles; Croft is a widely exhibited artist),

pushing the envelope with indigenous shows. For the exhibition "fluent" at the 1997 Venice Biennale, they positioned Aboriginal work at the forefront of contemporary art, mixing Murray River eel traps with Western Desert landscapes and more urban visions. "What was achieved through 'fluent' was to start people thinking about contemporary Aboriginal art overseas," says Croft. For starters there were no dot paintings or "Dreaming" in the title. "I just keep seeing those shows coming up," says Croft, "and they've been happening for 20 years. You want to move beyond that."

The AIAC does that by looking as much to the future as the past. It repositions Aboriginal art by locating it outside the displays of historical pieces within MQB. As embodied in Nouvel's architecture, Aboriginal art is its own wildly independent spirit. In this way, the founder of Sotheby's Aboriginal art department in Australia, Tim Klingender, likens its appeal to that of world music. "I don't think it is part of the continuing tradition of Western art which begins in Greco-Roman times and goes through the Renaissance and ultimately terminates in Postmodernism," says Klingender. "It has cross-cultural appeal. It has an aesthetic which relates to Modernism at times, yet it is infused with a language from a most ancient and diverse culture."

That its cultural autonomy should be recognized in a place like France ahead of Australia is perhaps not as surprising as it might appear. For a country that didn't grant its indigenous inhabitants the vote until 1967, modern Australia has sat uncomfortably with its ancient traditions. "European countries can embrace Aboriginal art without any sense of shame or guilt," says Chris Sarra, chair of the Australia Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board. "They don't have a stake in that, whereas Australia does."

The MQB also continues a French fascination with Australia's indigenous culture that began when Napoleon sent scientific voyages to the South Pacific. Napoleon's artists were the first to document Tasmania's Aborigines as individuals rather than types, even recording their songs and dance. "It's a tradition that's been rich and sustained over a long period of time," says Susan Hunt, curator of the 1999 show "Terre Napoléon: Australia Through French Eyes." "So this hasn't just come from nowhere." Indeed, during the 1950s, Paris-based artist Karel Kupka was the first to collect Arnhem Land barks as pieces of art, not anthropology; many of them will be displayed for the first time in MQB. "He was the first to recognize the individuality of each artist," says French-born Apolline Kohen, director of Maningrida Arts and

Culture, creative home to John Mawurndjui. In fact, it was the 1989 Paris exhibition, "Magiciens de la Terre," which showed the work of Aboriginal artists alongside their Western contemporaries for the first time, which sparked Kohen's interest in the field. "From my experience in Maningrida, it's been very good being French," she says, "because they think I've got a culture as well."

In her four years, the Paris-trained curator has already helped reshape perceptions of Aboriginal art abroad. As well as assisting with the current Mawurndjui retrospective, now at Hannover's Sprengel Museum in Germany, this year Kohen took the first ever show of Aboriginal art to the Middle East, when "Identity and Country: Contemporary Art from Maningrida" opened at the La Fontaine

Centre of Contemporary Art in Bahrain. "They were very curious," says Kohen. "They didn't get what they were expecting." No dot paintings or didgeridus; just the metamorphic power of *rarrk*. Her most heartening response? "Where's the Aboriginal art? You're just like, 'Well, it's all around you.'"

With this growing presence comes perhaps Aboriginal art's greatest gift to the world. As with the stars on Gulumbu Yunupingu's ceiling, it is no longer a sign of exotic otherness, but something that can unite everyone under the one roof. "Sometimes we make a fire," says Yunupingu. "We sit around the fire and look up into the sky. Big ones, small ones, little ones—faraway, close. Yolngu, everybody around the world loves to see them." In Paris, they're sparkling. ■

## PHILANTHROPY

## Desert Mother

**W**hen presidents and prime ministers gather at the state reception for the opening of the MQB next month, artist Ningura Napurrula won't be amongst the invited guests. While visitors mingle under her painted ceiling, Napurrula will most likely be back in her community of Kintore, 500 km west of Alice Springs, painting. Materially and spiritually, "she supports a lot of people," says Papunya Tula Artists' Paul Sweeney. "She has a very strong obligation to be there and keep everyone looked after."

In a real sense, Napurrula is painting for her community's life. Commonly described as a powerhouse, "she's an old bush lady," says Tim Klingender of Sotheby's. "If you know those old Pintupi people, it's almost as if they came out of the soil." With her late husband, Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi, Napurrula arrived at Papunya in 1962 after a traditional life in the Gibson Desert. Tjungurrayi was one of the first Pintupi men to ask for art supplies from Geoffrey Bardon, and his totemic paintings became an emblem for the Western Desert movement. His death from renal failure in 1998 also highlighted a health crisis that threatened the life of this artistic community.

Because of poverty and poor diet, the Pintupi have among the highest rates of kidney failure in the country. And in the last few years of his life, Tjungurrayi was forced to spend months on dialysis in Alice Springs, far from his family and friends. After his death, Napurrula and her community decided to put their art to good use. Enlisting the help of Sotheby's, they produced two large collaborative paintings which brought \$A1.1 million at auction. Proceeds from the sale



**BORN AGAIN** Napurrula's *Wurrulnga* carries the hopes of a new generation

paid for Australia's first desert dialysis facility, which opened at Kintore in late 2004. Eighteen months on, the unit is keeping 31 patients alive, including six artists. "It's really changed people's perceptions of kidney disease," says Sarah Brown, manager of the Western Desert Dialysis project. "Before it was a one-way ticket to town and home in a coffin."

That won't do for Napurrula. "She's a feisty, productive, non-stoppable character," says Klingender. And to help celebrate the opening of MQB, and to keep the dialysis unit flourishing, Sotheby's will auction her latest work in Paris on June 23, with all proceeds returning to Kintore. The subject, painted in Napurrula's inimitably intricate style, is of a sacred birthing site near Kiwirrkura. Which is entirely appropriate: From a painting conservatively valued at \$A100,000, a community's health can be reborn. —M.F.