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## ON COUNTRY

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PHOTOS STELLA SCIBERRAS

**REFLECTING BACK ON SOME ROAD** trips and dreaming them up in the subsequent months can be like reliving a favourite film or book – standout lines, cinematic sequences and characters who enchant and inspire – and some gouge into the flesh and not only pepper your mind with brilliant images but give you a kind of painterly lift-off.

My arrival at the Iltja Ntjarra / Many Hands Art Centre on the edge of Alice Springs and approaching the long painting tables I had all the trepidation of a young intern fronting up to a corporate boardroom. Surreptitious summings-up, lowered eyes and gingerly made introductions quickly became whinnies of laughter and excitedly made plans to head out later that week to paint the hills surrounding Standley Chasm.

The preceding weeks has been spent emailing and phoning the art centre director Iris Bendor to wrest a date, me almost begging to be given the chance to learn from Lenie

Namatjira and Gloria Pannka something of the watercolour style of landscape painting they inherited from their grandfather Albert.

As Stella (my daughter) and I loaded up, we were warned that if the ladies didn't take a shine to us that they'd turn the horse around at the end of the day and our dreams and preparations for camping would be dashed. As our confidence grew we drove west while the huge kangaroo tails defrosted in the back of the troop carrier and we eventually found a makeshift studio on the sheltered saddle of a hill and began warming to conversations with a tone and pace all their own.

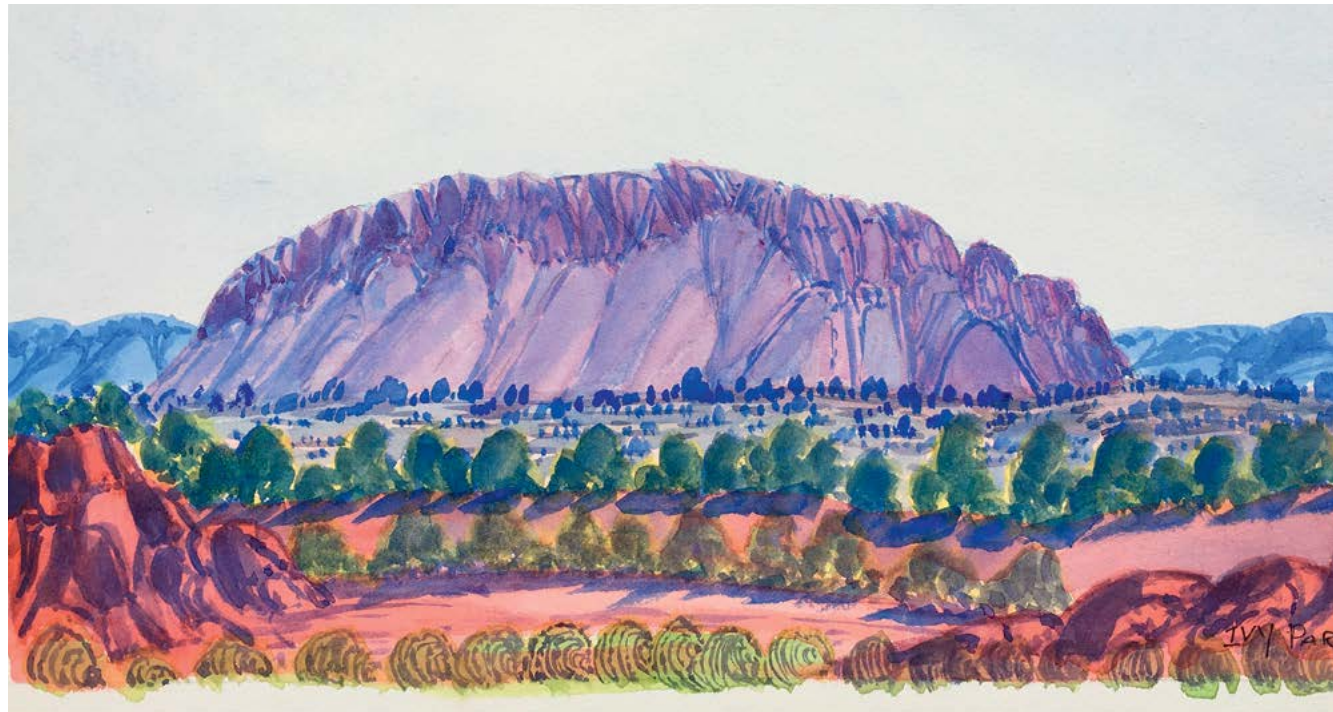
After a while eruptions of chatter would drown out the swish and scratch of half a dozen or so artists rendering carefully the shards of red rock that rise out of the long yellow grasses and spinifex that are dusted over the west MacDonnell Ranges. Scraps of advice, patient demonstrations and a lot of learning by example (me copying) helped ease

01 Lenie Namatjira, Luke Sciberras and Gloria Pannka

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Luke Sciberras and Lenie Namatjira working; Gloria Pannka preparing kangaroo tail for our dinner; Luke Sciberras, Napperbee, 2016, oil on board, 120 x 160 cm; Lenie and Gloria throwing kangaroo tails on the fire; Gloria Pannka painting; Luke Sciberras, This is Fish Hole Creek NT, oil on board 160 x 120cm; Lenie Namatjira doing the spinifex on Luke Sciberras' watercolour; Luke Sciberras, Hamilton Downs, 2016, oil on board, 180 x 120cm







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an immensely steep learning curve, and as the first afternoon matured the customary heated discussion ensued into what Stella and my skin names were to be.

Once that was settled there were long lessons on the construction of the system. I was Gloria's dad, Lenie's uncle and to great shrieks and gales of ridicule, husband (hubby) to Ivy Pareroultja. Here I think in our warmth combined with a great deal of passionate talk about painting, our friendships were found.

Suddenly discussions became more lively about the application of watercolour, often



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from conflicting angles among the women. Lenie or Gloria would take over my brush and suddenly I saw generations of elegant fingers and sophisticated understanding apply their magic over my boisterous beginnings.

It struck me that Stella and I were receiving knowledge that was moving in a figure eight form, from a non-Indigenous tradition, through Indigenous eyes and back again in turn to us, a view of their land through "white-man-style" eyes ...

The story of Rex Battarbee's first travels into Aranda country is now famous, having honed

his watercolour technique while recovering from near-fatal injuries sustained in the battlefield of Bullecourt in France during the First World War. Having been left for dead and miraculously rescued, his recovery would take some four years in hospitals in both Europe and Victoria. In a tremendous example of triumph over adversity he subsequently went on to make beautiful works of the landscape and held an exhibition in 1937 at the mission of Hermannsburg where many of the Indigenous locals would find not only inspiration but an enduring friendship with Battarbee. Among them were the young Albert Namatjira, Otto Pareroultja and others.

With all the history and technique of the Namatjiras' hallowed legacy came another dimension to the scene – Dreamtime stories layered in turn over the white-man missionary history which informed the whole tapestry. These women who have lived long, hard lives on grand cattle stations, town camps and on long mustering journeys, carried with them a firm belief in the Christian God who governed their childhoods – and all at once the view of the landscape is entirely traced with creatures and events of the Dreamtime. At times the features of the landscape we were painting and driving through were described to us as a giant caterpillar, or as a great looming face, times when mythical creatures scraped the land into the form it takes now ... and at other times out painting when asked "why do you do it like that Gloria?" The answer eventually comes ... "because it looks good"!

As we drove at dusk through the crude wire gates into Aboriginal lands to find a place to camp we realised that this was a welcome to country, creeks and hills, stone tools and rocky tracks which were all familiar to these women who have spent the most of their lives not only as artists but as the wives of jackaroos working for the man, and now this vast land is theirs again. With all this comes the overwhelming sense of privilege and welcome, traversing these long valleys with the people who know them best.

With an old grinding stone I found, Gloria set to pounding up the night's supply of pituri (a chewing tobacco type plant) for herself and Lenie; kangaroo tails and sweet potatoes were foiled up and buried in coals, and the only thing left to do was to talk as

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the fire grew warmer and the night drew around us. Lenie patted and smoothed all the ground around herself while she proudly told us of how she first flew to Perth (pointing west) then Dubai, and to London to meet the Queen (opening an exhibition of Albert Namatjira paintings) remarking on what lovely white teeth she had for an old lady. Often the tone would swing to a sinister tease about the "scrub bull" that was just there beyond the light of the fire, just near that big rock! Surely it was for Stella's benefit but on turning in, it had me staring out of my swag a little more intently than usual.

At the first blush of pink at dawn we realised that Lenie and Gloria had been up for hours, stoking, tidying and talking, and by the time a third billy of tea was poured, Gloria began speaking very directly in great gusts about the fate of their grandfather's intellectual property and copyright. She told us at length about how he always lived in poverty on the edge of town among the rocky hills near where Lenie lives now, and in the decades after his death none of his family has received the royalties from the plethora of merchandise, resales and reproductions of his work. Efforts are under way, she assures us, to return the ownership of his copyright to the family so that, as she put it, "we can continue his legacy with the funds it requires".

Whether or not a retrospective restoration of funds or dues will or can ever be granted to these people, there is a richness, an uprightness and a living tradition that is entirely theirs. The fact that they happily share it with the likes of me is testament to the integrity and virtue they carry, a repairing and spacious approach to art that is infectious.

It gives me great heart that an artist can see the world through new eyes, every time one really looks.

Here, essentially is a story and a history that is living on, but like most it is not linear, not black or white. It is helixed. From either end of a highway there is another Australia, one to go into rather than out to. ■

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- 10 Ivy Pareroultja, *Untitled*, 2016, watercolour on paper, 19 x 38cm  
11 Lenie Namatjira and Luke Sciberras  
12 Lenie Namatjira, Stella Sciberras and Gloria Pannka at Hamilton Downs, photographer Luke Sciberras  
13 Gloria Pannka, *Untitled*, 2016, watercolour on paper, 38 x 47cm

Courtesy the artists, Ilitja Ntjarra Many Hands Art Centre, and Kings Street Gallery on William, Sydney