



MAKINTI NAPANANGKA  
THE EMBODIED ARCHIVE

D

LAN

GALLERIES

## MAKINTI NAPANANGKA: THE EMBODIED ARCHIVE



This focused collection by Pintupi artist Makinti Napanangka (c.1922–2011) is a meditation on the performative lives of the dancing women who shape her Country in the Western Desert region of the Northern Territory. In this ethereal body of work, each painting balances an enduring ancestral presence with the transience of the human form. Napanangka's career developed in her senior years, her painted surfaces unprecedented among those of other Western Desert painters from the mid 1990s. Never conforming to the techniques of the local contemporary Indigenous art movement, she favoured the brush over dots applied with a fine stick to record her gestures. Rather than mapping the geographical boundaries of her Country, the canvas reverberates with the pulse of the Country, rhythm and touch inviting feeling as much as seeing. This is painting as embodied memory: not an image of Country but a trace of a body moving through it.

Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, Diana Taylor, distinguishes between the *archive*, comprising documents and objects that remain unchanged, and the *repertoire*: knowledge transmitted through gesture, movement and repetition.<sup>1</sup> Napanangka's canvases are part of the repertoire. Working with impaired vision, then with restored sight, and finally with an ageing hand, she proved that painting is not just about sight but about sensation itself, the accumulated knowledge of a body in motion.

Napanangka was born at Lupulnga, south of the Walungurru (Kintore) community, and spent her formative years living nomadically around the giant salt lake of Kaakurutintjinya (Lake Macdonald). In the company of her extended family, she walked into the Haasts Bluff ration depot in the early 1940s, eventually settling at the government settlement of Papunya and later at Walungurru. When she began painting in the mid 1990s, a permanent speech impediment constricted her voice, and she was almost blind from cataracts. Yet she was determined to give form to her beloved traditional lands, Lupulnga, her birthplace, which she held in memory through

fifty years of displacement as she moved east towards the government settlements. Every canvas became an act of return.

This exhibition, Napanangka's first international solo presentation, traces how physical transformation became a source of aesthetic innovation across three distinct phases of her late career.

By the mid 1990s, the cataracts had reduced Napanangka's visual experience to a haze of light and dark. Yet she painted almost daily, led by her daughters to the Papunya Tula Art Centre, established at Walungurru in the mid 1980s. These early, modest-sized works drew on memories of the landscape of her youth, and her style emerged in gestural tangles of desert-hued blues, purples, yellows and oranges. Using her brush, fingers and hands, she gave material form to the places of Kaakurutintjinya, Lampintja, Payarrnga and Mangari.

Napanangka's determination to paint despite poor eyesight strengthened her recall using other senses, and her canvases became an intimate, bodily record of Country and ceremony. Anthropologist Jennifer Biddle, writing on Central Desert women's painting, describes how the canvas becomes 'skin-like', not a surface for depiction but a site where physical traces are imprinted, creating 'links between people and Country.'<sup>2</sup> For Napanangka, visual constraint shaped her methodology. Feeling her way around the canvas, she established a deep relationship with her medium, guided by touch and the application of bright, contrasting colours to create a dialogue she could control. This was not compensation for infirmity. It was the foundation of a practice she would continue to build upon for the rest of her life.

In 2000, an operation restored Napanangka's sight, letting light in. Where her earlier works held the tactile traces of searching hands, delicate, light-filled compositions now emerged, bringing the Kungka Kutjarra (Two Women) into focus as they danced across Lupulnga, bursting with ancestral song. Fanned lines in yellow and white, her two primary colours, depict the bouncing,

blossoming skirts of the dancing women, executed with joyous clarity. Works such as *Lupulnga* 2003 radiate with this newfound brightness, their rhythmic striations suggesting both landscape and movement, figure and ground dissolving into one another.

Even with improved eyesight, Napanangka did not alter her style or align with the conventional representation of Country through dots, lines and circles. The tactile foundation of her work before 2000 remained, asserting the body's memory of how to move paint across canvas and the rhythm of gesture, established through years of touch. Restored sight became not a corrective but an addition, with luminosity layered over embodied knowledge. These light-filled canvases elevated her to prominence as one of the most influential artists of the Western Desert. They also demonstrated something profound: that her earlier tactile approach was never a limitation to be overcome. The body's changing capacities generated aesthetic evolution, not merely adaptation.

In the final phase of her career, Napanangka was in her late eighties, and her trembling hand began to produce animated, interlaced lines of nyimparra, the hairstring skirts worn by the dancing ancestral women. Now, the paint was being pushed and pulled with persuasive force. Evidence of this can be seen in the deeply etched scratches across the canvas, where the pressure has embedded the metal ferrule of the brush into the wet paint. These spindly scratches add another dimension to the women's movement; now the dance is accentuated as a seismograph records vibrations in the earth. Although her eyesight remained clear, the ancestral form of *Lupulnga* morphed under her shaky hand, infusing the women's skirts with new energy as they danced on.

The body painting and the bodies being painted become one. Napanangka's hand does not merely depict the dancing women; it moves with them. The tremble that often is read as frailty instead carries the acoustic thrum of ceremony, her gesture entwined with the eternal gestures of her Country's ancestors.

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that 'it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings'.<sup>3</sup> For Napanangka, this lending was literal; her body's rhythm joined the Two Women's, her pulse becoming the work's pulse. What may be understood as decline was in fact intensification: physical fragility transformed into kinetic vitality.

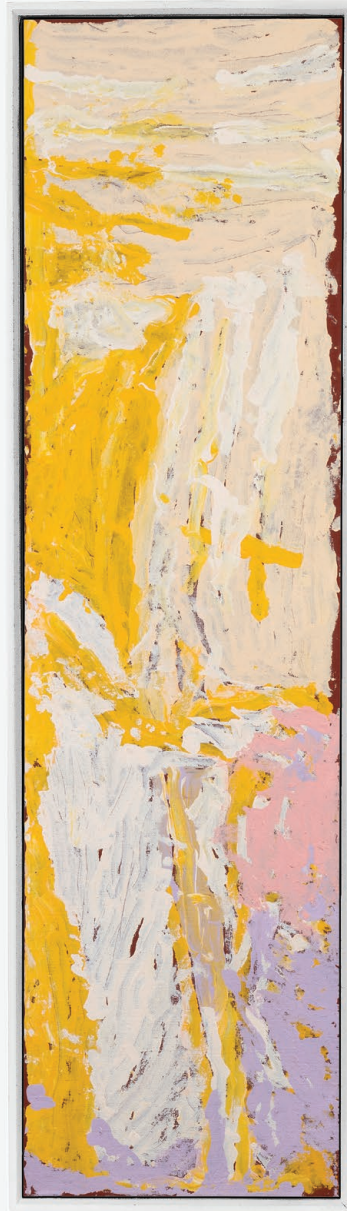
Each phase of Napanangka's career reshaped not only her own practice but also the understanding of what painting can hold. Her canvases are archives, but neither static nor document-like. They are embodied, records of a body engaging with Country, of ceremonial knowledge made tangible, of an artist whose physical circumstances became sources of authoritative vision rather than obstacles to it. In her late works, especially, the boundary dissolves between the painter's body and the ancestral bodies she paints, both moving, both dancing, both attuned to the same rhythm.

For those encountering Napanangka's work for the first time, these paintings offer an invitation to approach them not only with the eye but also with awareness of the body that made them and, perhaps, of your own body standing before them now.

#### VANESSA MERLINO

—

1. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003.
2. Jennifer L. Biddle, *Breasts, Bodies, Canvases: Central Desert Art as Experience*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, p. 60.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Carleton Dallery, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964, p. 162.



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2009

synthetic polymer paint on linen

42 × 11 inches (107 × 28 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0912036

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 9,500

AUD 14,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled - Lupulnga* 2009

synthetic polymer paint on linen

48 × 24 inches (122 × 61 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0911132

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 20,000

AUD 30,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled - Lupulnga* 2008

synthetic polymer paint on linen

35.8 × 24 inches (91 × 61 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

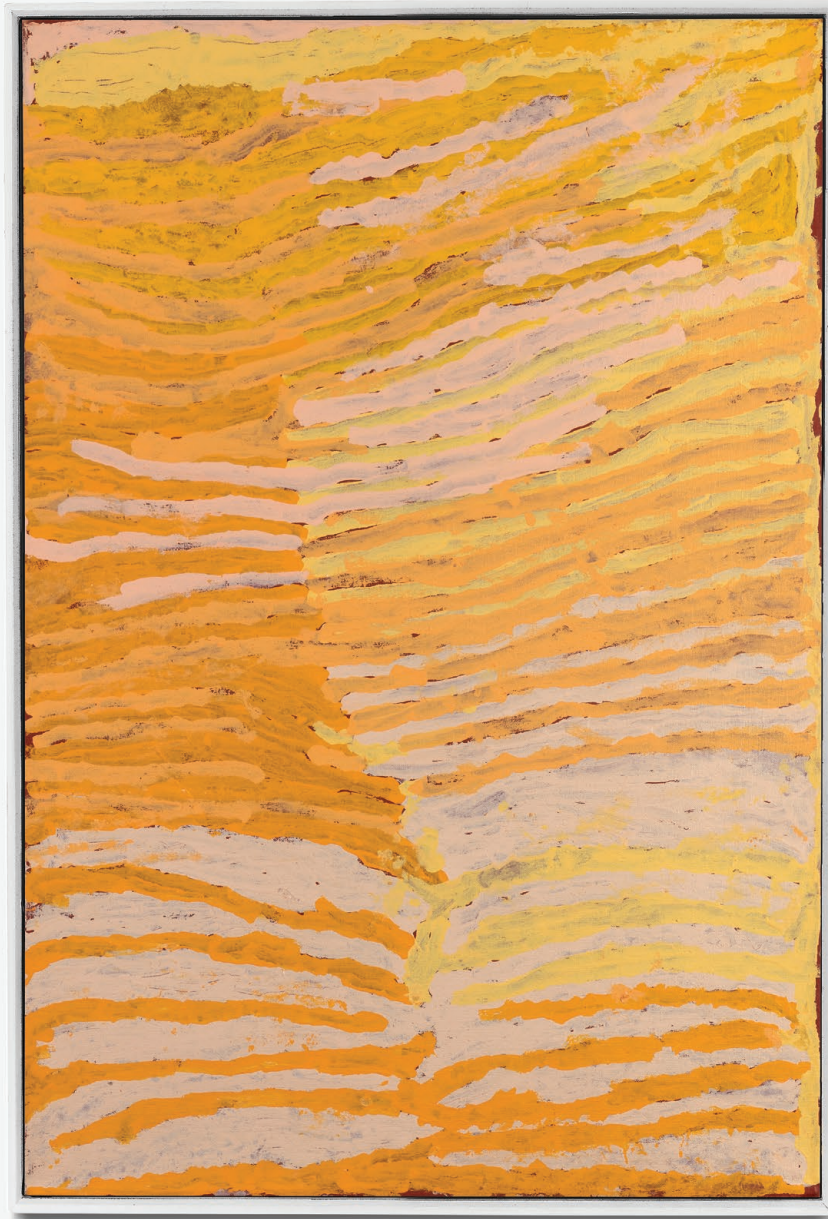
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0805063

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 15,000

AUD 22,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM  
c. 1922 – 2011  
Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2008  
synthetic polymer paint on linen  
35.8 × 24 inches (91 × 61 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory  
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,  
Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0802127  
Private Collection, South Australia,  
acquired from the above

USD 15,000  
AUD 22,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled - Lupulnga* 2008

synthetic polymer paint on linen

48 × 48 inches (122 × 122 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0801238

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 40,000

AUD 60,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled - Lupulnga* 2008

synthetic polymer paint on linen

35.8 × 24 inches (91 × 61 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0806043

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 15,000

AUD 22,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2008

synthetic polymer paint on linen

54 × 48 inches (137 × 122 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

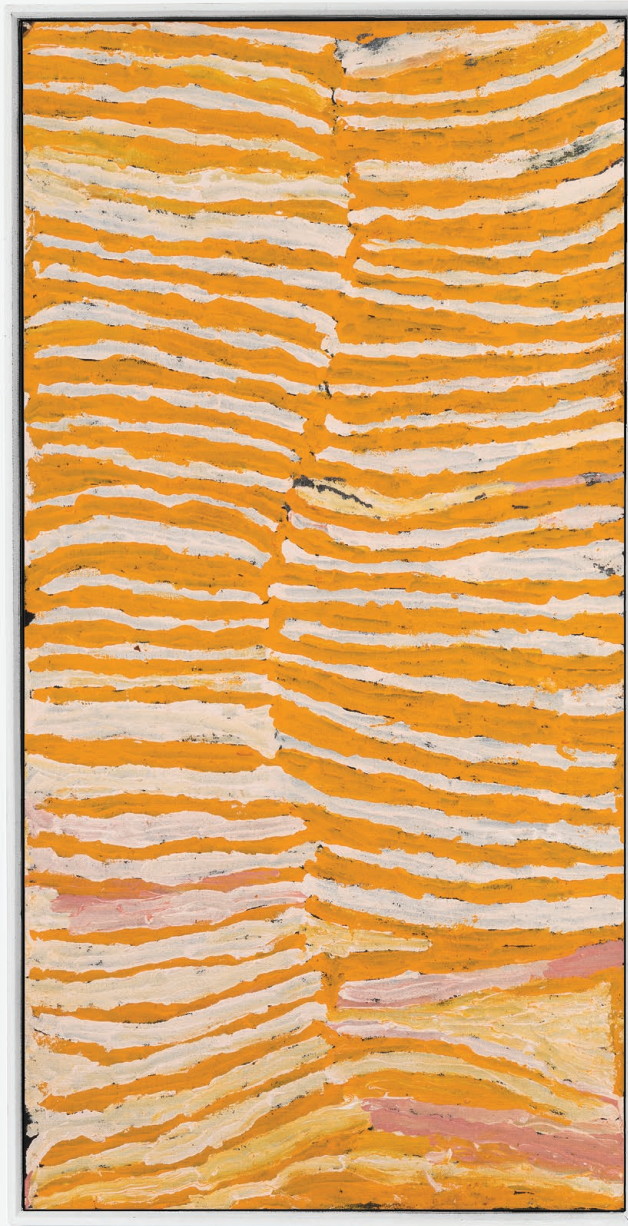
Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0810221

Private Collection, Northern Territory,

acquired from the above

USD 54,000

AUD 80,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2005

synthetic polymer paint on linen

35.8 × 18 inches (91 × 46 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0501027

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 10,000

AUD 15,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled - Lupulnga* 2004

synthetic polymer paint on linen

60.2 × 48 inches (153 × 122 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0408283

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 65,000

AUD 96,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2004

synthetic polymer paint on linen

35.8 × 24 inches (91 × 61 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0406227

Private Collection, acquired from the above

USD 15,000

AUD 22,000



MAKINTI NAPANANGKAAM

c. 1922 – 2011

Pintupi language

*Untitled – Lupulnga* 2003

synthetic polymer paint on linen

60 × 72 inches (152 × 183 cm)

PROVENANCE

The Artist, painted at Kintore, Northern Territory

Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs,

Northern Territory, cat. no. MN0305056

Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne,

Victoria, acquired from the above

Private Collection, Sydney, New South

Wales, acquired from the above

*Aboriginal Art*, Sotheby's, New

York, 23 May 2023, lot 49

Private Collection, New York,

acquired from the above

USD 235,000

AUD 350,000

25 EAST 73RD STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10021, USA  
DLANGALLERIES.COM

**D LAN GALLERIES**