



ROVER THOMAS

I want to paint

EDUCATION KIT

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Introduction

Nowhere has the merging of past and present, the spiritual and the physical, been more clearly revealed than in the visionary paintings of Kukatja/Wangkajunga artist Rover Thomas. Vacillating between figuration and abstraction, his corporeal, ochred landscapes suggest the topography of the East Kimberley landscape and the presence of unseen forces within it. In 1990 Rover Thomas was one of two Aboriginal artists selected to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.

Rover Thomas: I want to paint comprises works from the Holmes à Court Collection, Heytesbury, and from the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the private collection of Mary Mächa.

Rover Thomas: 'that real great artist bloke'

He [George Mung Mung] used to sing that corroboree of that real great artist bloke, you know, Rover Thomas.¹

Rover Thomas was born around 1926 near Kunawariji² (Well 33) on the Canning Stock Route in the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia. This is the country of his mother, Ngakuyipa, a Kukatja woman. Brought up by his two Wangkajunga fathers, Lanikan Thomas and Sundown, Thomas was of the Julama subsection skin group. As a young boy he lived a traditional bush life until the death of his mother.

Around the time of World War II, Thomas, aged about ten, moved with his family to Billiluna Station some 500km north on the Canning Stock Route. Here he began his career as a stockworker, which took him throughout the region and later informed his artistic practice. Before leaving his family at Billiluna Station to travel as far north as Wyndham and later into the Northern Territory working as a fencing contractor, he was initiated into manhood.

Returning to Western Australia after several years, Thomas settled on Gija country in the East Kimberley. He began working at Bow River Station with **Timmy Timms** (c1916–2000), a respected and renowned Gija lawman who also became a leading Australian artist. Thomas then moved to Texas Downs Station, where he lived and worked for the next nine years. It was here that he met his long-time friend and companion **Queenie McKenzie** (1925–98). McKenzie later led the East Kimberley women's painting movement and was known for her outgoing nature and her technique of mixing ochres to create signature pinks and greens.

Thomas then travelled north onto Old Lissadell Station and later south to Mabel Downs Station. During this time he developed strong personal relationships with Gija people and their country. After returning to Texas Downs Station, he met Rita Tinmaree, a Gija woman, and married for the second time. Together they had one daughter, Jane Yalunga.

In early 1975 Thomas moved to the emerging Aboriginal community of Warmun, at Turkey Creek, 200km south of Kununurra, where he worked on the construction of new homes. That year the Warmun community, through the agency of Thomas, would experience a cultural cataclysm that signalled the emergence of the contemporary East Kimberley school of art.

Painting: for Gurirr Gurirr

In late 1974 on the way to Doon Doon (Dunham River Station) from Halls Creek, a fatal motorcar accident occurred on the flooded road adjacent to the Warmun airstrip. An elderly Gija/Worla-speaking woman was critically injured and taken to Wyndham Regional Hospital and then by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to Perth. She died in the plane above Twurkurima/Jintiripul, a whirlpool off the coast near Derby. This is the site of Juntarkal, the Rainbow Serpent, an important and influential presence of the Ngarrangkarni, the creation, with a direct relationship to the forces of the wet season.

After her death, the woman's spirit travelled eastwards from the coast, returning to her home country in the East Kimberley. She was joined by Jimbi, an old juari (spirit) woman sometimes referred to in English as a 'devil-devil'. Jimbi became her guide, instructing her on the historical and contemporary importance of Ngarrangkarni sites they passed on their journey and explaining their significance by singing and naming them – many of which are connected to Juntarkal, the Rainbow Serpent. As they passed Kananganja (Mount King) the shadows, or spirits, of the people killed in the Bedford Downs massacre of c1924 spoke to them. This episode in their journey is referred to in Thomas's painting entitled *The shade from the hills comes over and talks in language*. Senior Gija artist **Paddy Bedford's** (born c1922) father and uncle were survivors of the massacre that is a ubiquitous subject in Bedford's paintings. The spirit women moved on passing Rugan (Crocodile Hole) and travelling west to Pangkalji (Pompeys Pillar) on Texas Downs Station, situated on respected Gija artist **Hector Jandany's** (born c1927) country, who paints Pangkalji.

Before travelling north to Manginta (Mount Cockburn, near Wyndham) the spirit women travelled past Lulumalulu, the Ngarrangkarni site where the old man Narungani was turned to stone along with the marlu (kangaroo) and julan (dog) that he was watching from the hill. This Ngarrangkarni landform and narrative are depicted in the paintings by Gija artist and traditional landowner **Goody Barrett** (born c1930). At Manginta the elderly woman was joined by another spirit, known as Manginta, after whom the site is named. Together they travelled into Miriwoong country, and passing Kununurra Bridge they came to a rocky outcrop on the outskirts of Kununurra – Kelly's Knob. Here they saw the devastation along the northern Australian coastline caused by Juntarkal. This event, commonly known as Cyclone Tracey, destroyed Darwin on Christmas Day in 1974. The destruction of Darwin was understood by many community leaders as a warning that Aboriginal people needed to maintain their culture and not be misguided by Gadiya (non-Aboriginal) ways.

In 1975 Thomas had a series of dream visitations where *'that old lady came back and made old Rover sick. And she gave him all that song, you know? That Gurirr Gurirr'*.³ This sequence of dreams began while Thomas slept during a break in a men's ceremony and continued over a number of months. The narrative of the woman's epic journey became the catalyst and subject for the Gurirr Gurirr (pronounced 'grill grill') balga's dance and song cycles. The Gurirr Gurirr balga is a public dance performance that recalls the woman's journey from west to east and relates the names and importance of the historical and contemporary events and associated sites she passed. Thomas was the Gurirr Gurirr 'director', encouraging dancers, singers and painters to assist in the performance. Initially the balga had little impact in Warmun, yet as it was refined by Thomas their hesitation was overcome and in 1979 it was well received by the community.

Thomas first related the woman's journey to **Paddy Jaminji** (1912–96), who was the woman's kin brother and Thomas's kin uncle. Jaminji had spent most of his life working as a stockman on Bedford Downs

and was already an established artist painting and carving owls and boomerangs. Following Thomas's instruction, Jaminji began painting images relating to each verse of the Gurirr Gurirr onto small boards of scrap material, using the traditional materials of locally mined ochres mixed with tree sap, and became the principal painter for this balga. Many of the events and associated sites described in the Gurirr Gurirr are not found within Gija country and are named in the associated languages such as Nagaryinyin, Worla or Miriwoong.

But in that corroboree he could name nearly every this country in that corroboree song. Like Warmun, right back to Kununurra. All around that country. Old Rover wasn't there, but in that song he knew them country. In the dream that old lady told him. And she gave this old man – he not from Gija, he Kukatja – but she gave it to him instead of giving it to Warmun people. And my dad [George Mung Mung] pick it up, all these old people, Hector [Jandany] mob, old [Paddy] Jaminji and old dad and we danced it at Warmun, down here.⁴

The Gurirr Gurirr production and performance involved many Gija community cultural leaders who were connected as ritual custodians and site owners. Many such as **George Mung Mung** (c1920–91), Hector Jandany, Jock Mosquito, **Jack Britten** (c1920–2002), Timmy Timms and later **Peggy Patrick** (born c1930) contributed to the painting of the boards (which were carried on the shoulders of dancers) often with the assistance of 'apprentices' like **Lena Nyadbi** (b1936). In the early 1980s Thomas and company toured the Gurirr Gurirr to surrounding districts, performing at a number of cultural gatherings at Guda Guda (Nine Mile) and Woorreranginy (Frog Hollow) with notable performances at the newly formed Kimberley Land Council bush meetings. The Gurirr Gurirr also toured the Northern Territory communities of Maningrida, Victoria River Downs Station and Lajamanu (Hooker Creek). This cross-communal activity encouraged cultural exchange and strengthened community links. The first performance of the Gurirr Gurirr in a non-Aboriginal community occurred in 1983 at the Aboriginal Arts Festival in Perth at what is now Curtin University. Thomas proudly stated in the 1993 National Gallery of Australia's *Roads cross* exhibition catalogue

**I can go anywhere, take this corroboree, Krill Krill [Gurirr Gurirr],
I can go Perth, from there to Melbourne, anywhere. Darwin.⁵**

Like the actions of Juntarkal, the open promotion of Gija culture was timely. Warmun as a newly founded and growing community was facing a number of social issues. The Gurirr Gurirr demonstrated the Ngarrangkarni's concurrent and contemporary existence, merging past and present with the spiritual and physical. It provided Warmun with a sense of belonging and pride in their surroundings, leading a cultural resurgence that was mirrored in Warmun's bi-cultural community school where senior community leaders painted to teach cultural studies. Set against a backdrop of wider social change in government policy towards Aboriginal affairs, the Gurirr Gurirr helped enlighten Gadiya (non-Aboriginal) audiences while for Thomas it affirmed his strong connection to Gija country and community.

Painting: for Gadiya

In the early 1980s Mary Mächa, the field officer for Aboriginal Traditional Art, visited Warmun and after seeing the Gurirr Gurirr boards offered to buy them from Jaminji. The purchase was refused as the boards were still in use on the tour, however, on a later trip Jaminji made them available on the condition that he would be supplied with materials to produce a replacement set. This arrangement facilitated the creation of three sets of boards used in the performance, which were eventually acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia.

From the early 1980s Jaminji started painting boards for direct sale. He expanded his distilled depictions of Gurirr Gurirr imagery, many of which tended to have a single black image or icon against a red background. New images encompassed a more detailed and expansively profiled landscapes that occasionally combined aerial perspectives. The use of yellow ochre and the introduction of canvas along with a change in scale supported Jaminji's artistic development. Throughout this time Thomas's role as director shifted to a collaborator and later a solo artist. His early work dates from 1982 and, as in Jaminji's paintings, they relate strongly to the Gurirr Gurirr. Thomas's work soon developed into an individual style that accommodated his broad knowledge of the Kimberley landscape. Thomas's densely layered surfaces exquisitely combine the four locally mined colours that have many subtle variations throughout the East Kimberley. Thomas used heavy natural resins to bind the ochres, adding a caramelised gloss to the surface of the work.

Thomas produced a number of figurative works, such as his 1989 painting *Grugrugi: Owl*. Also a feature of Jaminji's paintings, this style has come to define the Warmun school of art and has its origins in the rock art of the region. However, Thomas primarily worked by stripping his subject to its essential elements, using a minimalist aesthetic to intensify its impact. Defining and distinguishing Thomas's work was his ability to distill shapes, composition and colour, combined with an overriding aerial viewpoint. Thomas often inserted discrete images or figures into the planar perspective. This use of dual perspectives is highlighted in *Mirriya/Mureeya Texas country* 1989, where trapped Gija people appear in profile within a cave beneath an abstracted topography of country.

Thomas's paintings are now considered synonymous with the East Kimberley, even though his origins lay further south in the Great Sandy Desert. Thomas's transposed heritage was balanced and informed by his communal Warmun affiliations, his life as a stockworker and his gifted cultural knowledge of the Gurirr Gurirr. Through his paintings, Thomas was a distinguished interpreter of his heritage and culture.

This balance is reflected in the execution of his paintings. Pronounced outlines of dots have a striking effect, adding to the existing surface tension. Richly applied surfaces of ochre are broken, defined and intersected with innocent lines of dots that fringe the raw abysses of colour. With a rhythmic sense of the Gurirr Gurirr song, Thomas's textured shapes are composed to communicate the expanse of East Kimberley country. Embedded plains of deep colour reference the elaborate subjects of this landscape, including the Ngarrangkarni, the Gurirr Gurirr balga, and the colonisation and attempted genocide of Aboriginal people during 'the killing times' – as seen in *Bedford Downs massacre* 1985. Infused with these histories, the country has become a site of collective memory that directs Thomas's creative energy. Thomas's personal view and refinement of these subjects within his paintings convey the transformative power of country and strengthen culture while acting as a form of historical documentation.

In the late 1980s Thomas worked with Waringarri Aboriginal Arts and his paintings were in high demand. His work was included in the first two major group exhibitions of Kimberley art, *Art from the Kimberley* in 1988 at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney, and *Turkey Creek: recent work* exhibited in Melbourne in 1989. In

1990 Thomas and **Trevor Nickolls** (b1949) were selected to be the first Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. Thomas's works were also featured in the 1993 regional survey exhibition *Images of power* at the National Gallery of Victoria. His retrospective exhibition *Roads cross*, presented by the National Gallery of Australia in 1994, confirmed his status as a pre-eminent Australian artist.

Thomas's position within his adoptive Gija country affirmed the practice of other migratory artists to the East Kimberley region, such as Wangkajunga artist **Billy Thomas** (born c1920). Yet his influence can also be traced in the work of Gija artists **Freddy Timms** (b1946), **Rusty Peters** (b1935) and Lena Nyadbi.

In 1996 Thomas made a trip to Kunawarji, the country of his birth, which stimulated a resurgence of his practice and the creation of rarely seen images of his mother's country. The following year, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Western Australia, which due to his failing health was conferred on him *in absentia*. Thomas died in 1998 leaving as a legacy his unique view of country and rich lifetime of knowledge and experience, as expressed in his paintings as stated by his daughter, Jane Yalunga

I am very proud of my father [Rover Thomas], of his paintings and all the stories he has left behind for me and his grandchildren ... He was one of the first artists with old Uncle Paddy Jaminji to paint that way with ochre and bush paint. We are proud of what he has done and how he has become an important Australian artist. All Australians will remember him through his painting.⁶

Country: Warmun and the East Kimberley

Gija culture is founded in the Ngarrangkarni, which is a Gija term describing the origin of the people and the activities of their ancestors, who created country and infused it with their presence. Contemporary Gija life is continually informed by the Ngarrangkarni, which determines law and religion and is celebrated and reaffirmed through song, dance and art.

Gija country lies within the East Kimberley in the north of Western Australia. The Kimberley region comprises a complex social network. The Worora, Wunumbal and Nagarinyin people belong to Wandjina country in the northwest. The Wandjina is a creative being who controls the forces of nature. Western Kimberley communities include the Karajarri and Bardi people, who are renowned carvers of pearl shell pendants. South beyond Halls Creek are the Jaru people; further south in the Great Sandy Desert are the acrylic painting communities of the Walmajarri, Kukatja and Wangkajunga people. The East Kimberley is shared between the Gajirawoong, Miriwoong, Worla and Gija, whose neighbours are the Gurindji people across the Northern Territory border. The various communities of the Kimberley are strongly intertwined through ceremonial and trade activities, and often speak more than one language. Today East Kimberley people also speak Kriol, a distinct language using altered elements of Aboriginal and English grammar and vocabulary.

The Gija estate falls within the Ord River catchment area, where sandy riverbeds open up to vast spinifex flood plains and boob trees. The seasons dramatically fluctuate between the wet and the long dry. Caves and rock pools provide a human scale to the rising expanse of the East Kimberley ranges, silhouetted against the immense sky. Gija artist **Jack Britten** (c1920–2002) depicts the majestic sedimentary mounds of Purnululu (Bungle Bungle).

The Kimberley coastline has historically been frequented by trading Macassan fleets that travelled from what is now known as Indonesia. Abel Tasman was the first European to chart the coastline in 1644, followed by William Dampier in 1688 and Captain Philip King in 1818. The first European to go beyond the coast was Captain George Grey in 1841. Gadiya (or non-Aboriginal) incursions into Gija country began in February 1879, when Alexander Forester reported on the fertility of the country and encouraged the expanding pastoral industry.

The Durack family was the first of many Gadiya to settle on Gija country in 1882. Cattle brought from Queensland initiated a process of environmental degradation and unimaginable change for Gija people. The Gadiya population increased with the 1885 goldrush at Halls Creek, further supporting the pastoral industry and prompting the construction of a telegraph line through to Wyndham. Texas Downs, Mabel Downs, Bedford Downs and Lissadell stations were claimed as Gadiya, carving up the country and dispossessing the Gija people.

Differences in Gija and Gadiya land management further divided relations. Traditional burning off, which encouraged new growth and game, was no longer welcome after thousands of years of practice. Waterholes were aggressively seized and the spearing of cattle for food to replace traditional game was met with forceful retaliation. Gija refer to the period between 1890 and the 1920s as 'the killing times', during which it is estimated that half the Aboriginal population of the East Kimberley were massacred: Rover Thomas's kin brother, the Gija artist **Rusty Peters** (b1935), described it as a war. So desperate was the situation that a royal commission led by Reverend E R B Gribble was called to investigate in the mid 1920s.

During this period there was increasing interest in Indigenous communities from anthropologists such as A P Elkin. Simultaneously, 'mixed heritage' children forcibly removed from their families – now known as the Stolen Generation – were placed on missions. The first ration depot was established in 1901 on an old stock route near Turkey Creek, followed by Moola Bulla near Halls Creek in 1910 and later at Violet Valley, just south of Turkey Creek in 1911. While Turkey Creek and Violet Valley were havens for Gija people escaping frontier violence, they were created to centralise and assimilate the Indigenous population and were rife with health and social problems.

World War II precipitated the growth of the cattle industry and a national shortage of labour. The region's Aboriginal population, who worked as stockmen and stockwomen, domestics and rouseabouts, provided an inexpensive workforce that ensured the success of the pastoral industry. In these comparatively favourable conditions, stockworkers had some security. Families were provided with basic rations and were often able to camp on their country, enabling the continuation of cultural practices during bush holidays. Some Aboriginal people were treated appallingly, enslaved onto stations, and the use of neck chains for 'runaways' was a common practice continuing well into the 1950s.

This situation continued until 1969 with the introduction of the Pastoral Award legislation that attempted to ensure equal payment for Aboriginal stockworkers, theoretically improving employment conditions, following the 1967 referendum. Yet the refusal of station managers to pay the award wage combined with the industrialisation of a weakening meat industry saw most Aboriginal stockworkers and their families evicted from stations to become unemployed and homeless. Stockwork, however, has become a unique aspect of contemporary Kimberley Aboriginal culture.

The mass expulsion of Aboriginal people created fringe camps, with no infrastructure and atrocious living conditions. These fringe camps were set up on the outskirts of Gadiya settlements, like the emerging township Kununurra in the northern Miriwoong country. Kununurra was founded in 1961 as a result of the building of the Ord River Dam to support the developing agricultural industries. The Ord River Dam further displaced local Aboriginal communities by flooding their country and Ngarrangkarni sites. In an effort to contain the fragmented refugees of the East Kimberley, the government assisted in the establishment of Warmun, in proximity to the Turkey Creek ration depot.

The early 1970s saw an investment into Aboriginal affairs by the Whitlam Labour government and growing awareness of Indigenous issues among white Australians. The community of Warmun received basic capital infrastructure – running water and electricity were eventually supplied along with the construction of additional homes and a community store. With the formation of the Kimberley Land Council in 1978, traditional landowners gained recognition and representation. This followed the establishment of the Northern Territory's Northern and Central Land Councils as part of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976.

Aboriginal self-determination empowered communities and generated a resurgence of cultural maintenance. Warmun established its bi-cultural community school in 1979 and promoted 'two-way' education. Children were now learning their culture from artists like **George Mung Mung** (c1920–91), Jack Britten, **Queenie McKenzie** (1925–98) and **Hector Jandany** (born c1929), who often used their paintings to communicate Aboriginal knowledge while displaced from their homelands. The school became central to the development of Warmun, and continues today using many of the early paintings as resources. The senior community leaders who painted for the school were also involved in the production of Rover Thomas and **Paddy Jaminji's** (1912–96) Gurirr Gurirr balga. Together these two cultural initiatives provided the catalyst and foundation for the Warmun school of art.

The school's shift from painting for educational and ceremonial purposes to commercial development was initially supported by Aboriginal Traditional Art, the Perth marketing outlet of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd. The Australia Council's Aboriginal Arts Board developed this initiative in 1973, which supported a number of galleries based in capital cities that promoted and sold Aboriginal arts and crafts in a mainstream context. Mary Macha, the field officer for Aboriginal Traditional Art at the time, supplied artists with materials and a market to develop their artistic practice and earn an income, while restoring self-esteem and pride through cultural practices.

Paddy Jaminji led the burgeoning painting movement with the individual styles of each artist strengthening and consolidating the Warmun school of art. Paintings on plywood or masonite 'boards' used locally mined ochres which were initially mixed with tree sap or resin as a binder. Today ochre paintings are made with PVA glue and canvas, which are still referred to as 'boards'. The 1970s also saw the establishment of the women's painting movement championed by Queenie McKenzie and **Madigan Thomas** (born c1932). Notable male artists included George Mung Mung, Jack Britten, Hector Jandany, **Freddie Timms** (b1946–) and Rover Thomas.

Waringarri Arts Aboriginal Corporation was established in 1985 in Kununurra. Today primarily servicing local Miriwoong and Gajirrawoong artists, Waringarri initially covered the majority of the Kimberley region. During this period Waringarri organised two premier exhibitions placing Kimberley art within the mainstream public domain, *Art from the Kimberley* at Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney, in 1988 and *Turkey Creek: recent work* in Melbourne 1989. Both exhibitions included major works by Thomas, Jaminji, Mung Mung, Britten and Timms. The diversity and strength of the Kimberley art region was highlighted in the major 1993 survey exhibition *Images of power* at the National Gallery of Victoria.

As communities expanded and moved, the regional art movement soon needed other facilities. In 1997 Red Rock Art was established in Kununurra to service a range of artists including southern Wangkajunga artist **Billy Thomas** (born c1920). That year Freddy Timms also founded the Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation at Rugan (Crocodile Hole), again in the spirit of self-determination. The following year Warmun Arts Centre was established by the Warmun community under their ownership and control.

Artists today continue the tradition of celebrating the Ngarrangkarni through painting as stated by **Peggy Patrick** (born c1930) at the 2002 Melbourne Festival

Painting means to us country. That's why people paint. We are born with it, we got it in our body, on our bones - we are born with it - it is on our skin. Painting comes from underground. You got to dig to get it out. Red, black, white, yellow.⁷

GLOSSARY

Balga: a public dance performance involving dance and song cycles

Gadiya: people of Caucasian ancestry or an item or activity introduced to the Kimberley culture post-European contact

Juntarkal: the Rainbow Snake, who resides at Twurrkurima/Jintiripul, a whirlpool off the East Kimberley coast near Derby. Juntarkal has a direct relationship to the forces of the wet season

Ngarrangkarni: Gija term describing the culture of the people and the activities of their ancestors. Ngarrangkarni determines law and religion and is celebrated through song, dance and art

Lundari (Barramundi Dreaming) 1986

earth pigments and natural binders on plywood 60 x 90 cm
The Holmes à Court Collection, Perth
© The Estate of Rover Thomas, c/ - Warmun Arts Centre 2003

In the Ngarrangkarni (creation) Daiwul the ancestral barramundi was being chased up river. To avoid being captured, the giant barramundi jumped over the hill, scraping its belly to safely land in the adjacent river. The scales were dispersed throughout the surrounding country, turning into diamonds. Today these diamonds are mined on this site.



His compositions are marked by lines of dots as traditionally to delineate icons and figures, now to demarcate space and country. Thomas articulates a highly personal vision in which the land becomes an allegory for ancestral dramas, personal experience and historical events. The presence of ancestral and more recent histories of the land in his paintings suggest constant interaction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural ideas in contemporary Australia.

Avril Quail, *The eye of the storm: eight contemporary Indigenous Australian artists*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 1996, p92

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Thomas worked as a stockman, riding a horse around the East Kimberley region.

Imagine riding a horse into this country.

Where would you look for diamonds?

Describe what you can see, hear and smell.

Name the different colours used in this painting.

What might they represent?

How did Thomas apply these colours?

a) with a brush b) with a stick c) both.

How can you tell?

Look at the paint that Thomas used to depict this site in East Kimberley country.

How do you think Thomas made the paint?

Does the paint give you a better feel for East Kimberley country?

What materials can you use to make paint with?

Experiment with making paint from different materials you find in the classroom, schoolyard or at home.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Thomas never made preparatory drawings. What evidence can you find for this in his paintings? Is the direct and emotive process conveyed to the audience? What does this technique tell us about Thomas's relationship to his subject? Research and discuss the similarities and differences between Thomas's paintings and the Heidelberg school art movement that also tried to capture the essence of the Australian landscape.
- Thomas is part of the Aboriginal art movement known as the Warmun school of art. Research other artists from this movement and consider their differences and similarities. Compare the Warmun school of art to other Indigenous art movements within Australia, including the Central and Western Desert movement. What can we learn about the Warmun school of art and the diversity of Indigenous art?
- The use of paints made from locally mined ochres has become a key feature of the Warmun school of art and has often been described as *painting country with country*. How does Thomas's use of ochre paint reference a sense of place? Would his images change if they were made with acrylic paint? Create an image or sculpture using found materials from your local environment. Present the artworks describing the materials and their meanings.
- Thomas and fellow Indigenous artist **Trevor Nickolls** (b1949) were the first Indigenous artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990. *fluent* in 1997 was the second Indigenous exhibition to represent Australia at the Biennale and included the work of three Aboriginal women, **Emily Kame Kngwarreye** (c1910-96), **Yvonne Koolmatrice** (b1994) and **Judy Watson** (b1959). The exhibition was curated by **Hetti Perkins** and **Brenda L Croft**. Case study the curators of these two different exhibitions. Discuss the role of the curators and its political and cultural implications. How did this change the way the exhibition was received?
- Indigenous Australian art is rarely placed within the wider Australian art context, isolating Indigenous artists. Discuss why this has happened and its effect on Australian art and Australian identity. Curate your own exhibition using Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists considering themes other than ethnicity.

Bedford Downs massacre 1985

earth pigments on canvas board 95.3 x 179.8 cm
The Holmes à Court Collection, Perth
© The Estate of Rover Thomas, c/ - Warmun Arts Centre 2003



This painting depicts the Bedford Downs Station massacre site in the East Kimberley. The massacre occurred around 1924, when the station manager poisoned a group of Aboriginal people who were living on the station. Paralysed by the poison, the victims were then shot. In an effort to conceal the atrocity, the bodies were cremated using piles of firewood that the station manager had previously ordered the Aboriginal workers to collect.

... 'Bedford Downs Killings', 'Texas Downs Killings' and 'Ruby Plains Killings', Thomas's landscapes take on a potentially specific quality. They become *momento mori*. Thomas

sees it as his duty to the past, present and future generations to remember those times accurately, and in the paintings he sets out to describe the horror in the only way he can – he places the killings in the landscape where they occurred. In doing so he becomes a cartographer of massacres. Louis Nowra, 'Blackness in the art of [Rover Thomas]', *Art and Australia*, vol 1, 1997, p95

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Thomas has painted a sad place in East Kimberley country.

How does this painting make you feel?

Name the colours and describe the shapes used in this painting.

What could the colours and shapes represent?

Think of shapes that represent your important place.

Draw your shapes and make a story from them.

Why do you think Thomas painted this sad country?

Why would you paint something sad or upsetting in symbols?

Thomas has painted this place three times in this exhibition.

Find the other paintings of Bedford Downs Station.

Look for similarities in the artworks and spot the differences.

What angle does Thomas use in each painting.

a) from the sky b) from a hill c) from the ground.

How can you tell?

Why has Thomas painted this place so many times?

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Study this painting of the Bedford Downs massacre. Imagine how Thomas might have felt about the massacre of these Aboriginal people. In contrast, examine the painting's aesthetic qualities – colour, composition and scale etc. Compare Thomas's painting to *Guernica* 1937 by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Consider how an artwork's aesthetic qualities address subjects of horror and grief. What is the role of art for artists and communities who are coming to terms with tragic events?
- Compare the two other images of Bedford Downs Station within the exhibition. Comment on how Thomas has worked with the same subject to create diverse imagery using colour, perspective and space. Considering Thomas's minimal practice, write a haiku poem about loss and grief.
- The Gija people refer to the period of conflict between 1890 and the 1920s as 'the killing times' and state that 'they [Gadiya] killed the people here [East Kimberley] to the south, the north, the west and the east'.⁸ Look at the work of other Indigenous artists who use their work to record the history of massacres and dispossession, such as Waanyi artist Judy Watson (b1959).
- Thomas's paintings function beyond the aesthetic and the emotional to become historical documents. Consider other Indigenous artists including Tommy McRae (c1830s–1901) and Elaine Russell (b1941). Write an article describing how these artists document Indigenous history and why their artworks are important within Australian history.

Notes

1. Patrick Mung Mung in *True stories: artists of the East Kimberley*, directed by James Marshall & Hetti Perkins, 25 mins, Art Gallery of New South Wales 2004
2. Also spell Gunawaggi
3. Patrick Mung Mung in *True stories: artists of the East Kimberley*, directed by James Marshall & Hetti Perkins, 25 mins, Art Gallery of New South Wales 2004
4. Rover Thomas, *True Stories: artists of the East Kimberley*, directed by James Marshall & Hetti Perkins, 25 mins, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004
5. *Roads cross: the paintings of Rover Thomas* (exh cat), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 1993, p24
6. Jane Yalunga, personal correspondence February 2004
7. Peggy Patrick, Artists Week, Melbourne Festival, October 2002
8. Rusty Peters, *Blood on the spinifex* (exh cat), Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne 2002 p59

Two Men Dreaming c1985

earth pigments on canvas board 91 x 61 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 2000
© The Estate of Rover Thomas, c/ - Warmun Arts Centre 2003



In the Ngarrangkarni (creation), an old man stopped to camp beside a waterhole. Here he turned into a rock, the large central shape. The hills around him are his weapons – boomerang and fighting sticks. The pale band below represents the reflected moonlight, and at the bottom of the painting, sweet water, cool and deep.

His landscapes are corporeal, vacillating between figuration and abstraction to suggest the topography of the East Kimberley and the presence of unseen forces within it ...

In Thomas's tour de force painting, *Two Men Dreaming*, c1985, the form of an old ancestral man, turned to stone, is accentuated by the gleam of the rising moon.

Hetti Perkins & Theresa Willstedt, *Tradition Today: Indigenous art in Australia*, AGNSW 2004 p136

K-6

Look at the shapes within this painting.

Find the man, the boomerang, the fighting sticks and the sweet water.

Name the colours used in this painting.

Describe how they make you feel.

Describe how you imagine East Kimberley country.

Make your own painting only using four of your favourite colours.

Role play being the man who has turned to stone. How long can you stay quiet and still?

Imagine what he was doing before he was turned to stone.

Write a story about being part of the landscape for thousands of years.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

• *Two men dreaming*, c1985 is considered one of Thomas's greatest paintings. Analyse the composition. Is it static or dynamic? How does

the composed space convey a sense of drama?

• Research the East Kimberley landscape by collecting photos. Compare Thomas's paintings to the photos. Analyse how these representations are similar or different by making a list of words describing the photos and a list of words describing the paintings.

• Thomas started working as a stockman around the age of 11, riding horses and walking throughout the East Kimberley region. Research stockwork in the Kimberley and the Canning Stock Route regions. Discuss how stockwork affected Thomas's relationship to country and influenced his art.

• Compare Thomas's landscapes to the work of Australian artists **John Olsen** (b1928) and **Fred Williams** (1927-82). Discuss how each artist represents the Australian landscape. Consider individual techniques and approaches, particularly their use of colour and perspective.

• Thomas always painted from memory. Look at a landscape for five seconds, then shut your eyes and describe the landscape. Now look at the landscape in Thomas's painting for five seconds, then shut your eyes and describe what you remember. Create a painting or drawing of one of your earliest childhood memories. Consider how your emotions may have affected your memory. Discuss how memory works within Thomas's paintings.

• For Gija people the Ngarrangkarni is a time of cultural creation, and is expressed through song, dance, law and art. The Ngarrangkarni encompasses the ancestral past and continues today. How is the concept of the Ngarrangkarni similar to or different from the creation beliefs of other religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

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This education kit has been designed as an introduction to support the exhibition **Rover Thomas: I want to paint**. The kit highlights key themes and works and aims to provide a context for their use as a resource for K-6 and 7-12 audiences. It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as pre or post-visit resource material.

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