

Hidden Outback Transcript

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● Dream Traces – Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Culture

Curator, writer and traveller Rebecca Hossack introduces the people, art and culture of the Northern Territory.

Rebecca: Good afternoon. You've been hearing a lot today about the Northern Territory, but for many people there is no such thing as the Northern Territory. This vast tract of land that to aboriginal dwellers who have lived there for millennia, is a collection of patchwork of many countries. These countries contain people who have different appearance, different languages and different customs. I think the closest and best analogy for you is to think of Europe and when you go through these lands belonging to the Pintupi, the Pitjantjatjara, the Allawarra and the Warlpiri think of it as a journey through Europe, covering many different lands and customs. However, the people of these countries are united by one thing. A profound and deep love of the land. It is almost impossible to describe how great the aboriginal attachment to land is. I was once talking to a younger women, and she said 'Rebecca, we are the tongue on the body of the land, so it is pretty hard to get a closer relationship than that.' The one thing that does unite these people, apart from the love of the land is the system of dreaming. It is the system which has often been mistaken, or mistakenly called dreamtime, but in fact it is much more profound than that. It really means the law. The law, how things were, how they are and how they always will be. In the beginning Aboriginal people believed there was nothing, there was a void, and out of this void came the chingari they came from the ground, they walked across the land they sang it into being. They had many characteristics, some human, some animal and they had the ability to metamorphose. When they had finished creating the land and the world, every single blade of grass, every beetle, every rock, every star, every tree and when they finished they sank back into the land whence they came, some rose up into the sky and remained there as stars and some remained on earth as sacred sights or strange formations. They had human characteristics, for example, if they fought and threw rocks at each other that might make a mountain. If they lay down and wept it might make a valley or a lake. Everything can be explained by the actions of these ancestral beings, the chingari. But it's not just monumental sights such as Uluru that you see here. There are other scared sites, every bit of the land you will cross when you go to the Northern Territory or this collection of countries, aboriginal countries, is sacred. I remember once being taken by the Spinifex people to show me the site where the emu ancestor came from and I stood looking at a piece of bare earth and I said "where?" and it was a tiny, tiny pebble, that big! That was the sacred site. So don't just think these spectralular

rock formations or amazing trees are sacred, everything that you pass is sacred. If we were put in this vast tract of empty land we would find it very difficult to survive but part of the dreaming also gives ways of explaining of how to exist in the land and it is extraordinary to travel with Aboriginal people and see the way they maintain their country and if you drop a blind folded aboriginal man into the middle of this landscape he would be able to find his way to wherever he wanted to go and survive for days, weeks, months. A system of land management has been evolved by the aboriginal people and fire burning is one of them, the first time I encountered this I was absolutely terrified. I was with an old lady who was throwing matches out of the window of the car with gay abandon, and the bush was bursting into flames all around us, but it is absolutely essential for the survival of aboriginal people because only through the fires will certain plants germinate. When the new fresh shoots appear when the scrub has been cleared, the animals are attracted and the people can live. This is a water hole. If you dig at this for several days you will find water good enough to drink and these gilla or waters in the desert do get bigger and bigger and once they

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have been dug out and sung, they are always sung, the ancestors are sung out of the water holes, they provide water and they then attract the birds and the whole system of regeneration of the desert begins. This water hole which Jimmy Piker is drinking from is 'Culputi'; which is the Rainbow Serpent and I always remember when Jimmy came to London, he painted the Rainbow Serpent on the pavement outside my gallery, and I said, "what does he do Jimmy?", he said "he brings the storms" and I said "Jimmy, no, we've just had such a rotten summer! but he won't know you've painted", he said "he will." And sure enough two days later the biggest thunder storm arrived in central London and Jimmy said "I told you Culputi would know". Here you see Jimmy making animal tracks and marks in sand. Now I wanted to show you this because you will walk through the bush and you will not notice marks like this when you travel or perhaps when you are driving your hermetically sealed four-wheeled drive air conditioned car; you will miss these tiny, tiny marks. Now this is the actual wing tip of the eagle just taking off and the Aboriginals have such a profound and acute sense of observation that they can see these little marks that we would walk over and not see and you will also see some of the marks that Jimmy is drawing in the sand will be translated later into the modern medium of painting. Here indeed is the eagle that made those marks and I put that in because actually when Jimmy was a child he was put down in a culamon, a little basket like a garden trug while his mother was gathering food and a eagle came and picked him up thinking he was a dainty morsel and carried him off above this spinifex until his mother threw stones at the eagle and dropped him, and to this day Jimmy has scars on his back where he fell into this Spinifex grass. This is a white mans view of the vast tracks of central Australia; featureless, grey, boring. This is an aboriginal persons view of exactly the same land; rich in meaning; rich in profound connection to know, to be able to paint that map would be the equal of knowing the Illiad or the Odyssey off by heart; profound knowledge of country is needed to create these images. When I was born in Australia in 1955, no Aboriginal people were citizens of their own country and it seems extraordinary now but they weren't able to have passports, to own homes, nothing. However the first Aboriginal to become an Australian citizen was a man named Albert Namatjira. He was from the Northern Territory although he wouldn't of called it such. He was born in 1902 in a mission called Hermannsburg and when he was a young a man he was befriended by an English water colourist called Rex Batterby. Rex Batterby took him out to look after the camels when he went to paint water colours; beautiful water colours of the Australian desert; Albert showed enormous proficiency at this. He had exhibitions in 1936 in Melbourne, they were much acclaimed and as a result grew up with very well meaning people who made moves to make Albert the first Australian citizen. This happened in 1957. Here is one of his beautiful landscapes and the landscape of central Australia and many of who have been there will know it looks just like this. When Albert was made a citizen of Australia he did what many of us would do, he had occasion to celebrate, he bought some wine. As an Aboriginal everything he owned he had to share with his family - he shared the wine with his family and he was arrested for supplying alcohol to the natives. I think this is a very tragic photograph. This is Albert Namatjira being led to jail in Alice Springs., This proud, wonderful Aranda man who did everything he could to please the white man to try and succeed in their world was taken to jail, he was released two years later and he died two months after being released from jail. His family said he died of a broken heart, he himself said "why don't they just put a gun to our heads and shoot us all for that is what they want". But while Albert was painting his water colours in the European idiom the people of the various countries in the Northern Territory had been continuing to create their art, to create their art to invoke the chingaari; the sacred spiritis which came from the past into the present and ensured the future. Here you will see a rock carving with the classic Jingarri circle representing the ancestors. The art of course was not on modern medium, it was painting on bodies on rocks, carved into trees or huge vast sand paintings were created. Some of these were the size of a football pitch and the sand was often piled up to 3 feet high and studded with feathers or the fluff of flowers using blood or gum from the eucalyptus to secure it - these ceremonies were profoundly

important and the art pertaining to them is probably the oldest artistic tradition in the world and it goes back some 50,000 years; so if you think of going to the British Museum and seeing the Egyptian antiquities 3000 years old; this is 50,000 years of continuous artistic practice but of course it was for the large part ephemeral. In 1971 the art began the movement of transcribing this ancient art form into modern materials, the movement that was to give tremendous importance to aboriginal cultural survival began. And it began here in the middle of the Northern Territory at a place called Papunya and it began with this man Geoffrey Bardon, a school teacher. When I was 12 in 1969 a referendum had been held and people had voted to give Aboriginal people the rights of citizenship and as part of this process of citizenship and assimilation settlements were built. They have been called concentration camps and were built in the central Australian desert around Alice Springs, all different people from different countries were rounded up and put into these settlements. So you had people who traditionally weren't allowed to see each other like Pintupi and Arrernte were put into a barbed wire encampment and were expected to live in these horrible little fibrous cement boxes. The atmosphere, as you can imagine, was incredibly grim and depressing. People sat in the sand, their heads bowed, flies and broken glass all around them. Into this very depressing scene this young school teacher Geoffrey Bardon drove. He befriended the old men – the school gardeners, the people doing odd jobs in the yard and at night they used to come and sit with him. He also taught the school children and the more he talked to the old men the more he realised it was ridiculous teaching these children Enid Blyton stories when there was obviously an enormous profound legacy of incredible stories. The men used to tell them these stories of creation when they sat at night with him on the veranda, so one night he said to them “lets paint a mural of your story on the school wall of Papunya”. Immediately the atmosphere perked up, people started discussing what would be an appropriate story to do. There was a great feeling of excitement in the air and eventually the school gardener Billy Stockman and Carper painted the Honey Ant Dreaming, sadly the Australian government has whitewashed over what was really was an incredibly important historic monument. Geoffrey then thought it would be interesting for the men to have a source of income, to do something conducive and he found bits of hard-board and building materials lying around the settlement and the men started painting on them and he had the idea of taking them in his utility truck to Alice Springs some 240 km away and selling them for \$10 and bringing the money back for the men and he did this. Interestingly enough, a couple of years ago I was visited by a nurse who had been in Papunya at this time and she bought one of these pictures on a bit of broken material and on the back it had it had on the back \$10. She said, “Rebecca I'm moving house I just thought you might like to have this?”, and I said “this is very very kind and I would absolutely love more than anything in the world but I can't accept it because it's worth a lot of money” and she said “no, no it's just a bit of nothing” and I said “no, it isn't.” and it was put into Sotherby's sale and she sold it for \$240,000. So, she not only moved house, she moved country. These paintings, and this is one of the first paintings that was produced at Papunya, were tiny in scale but profound in meaning as I say they were just done on scraps of anything and they tell us stories of Papunya, the country around Papunya and the ancestors that created in and again you can see that concentric circle which you saw carved on the rock. Reading these pictures actually becomes quite easy because as I say, to understand, to have this knowledge is like reading the Odyssey or to know the Odyssey off by heart but there is a superficial way of reading them. For example, if you see the U-shape that usually represents a human being because if we sat down cross-legged in the sand, that is the shape our body would make – and you saw earlier Jimmy drawing into the sand for example three strokes like that represents the feet of an emu; it's not that simple because sometimes when you see that concentric circle it can represent a fire place, a water hole, or where the Jinjaari returned to the earth after creating it. Here again you can see the emu footprints and the emus are all coming to a water hole. But this is very superficial analysis of these paintings and the real knowledge is only for those who have been initiated for decades. This is the Papunya painting by Gabriella Possum; it's interesting some of these pictures do reflect an

and this is a lovely water dreaming by one of the Lajamanu artists this is a 'Bush Potato Dreaming'. A lot of these stories are not concerned with creation, they are concerned with survival. How to find food, and through these iconic images people actually know how to dig up the tubas where they are, how the roots grow under the ground and here again you can see water cascading down from three water holes a Lajamanu

painting very very calm and minimal. Utopia - wonderful name for a country. That is actually a white mans name,. Utopia is home to an extraordinary group of Aboriginal people Emily Kame Kngwarreye is perhaps the most famous. Some of you may of heard of her, she began painting in her eighties - never too late to start - and very quickly became internationally acclaimed and she could never quite understand what the fuss was. She was a tiny, tiny woman about this big very very fierce and very very powerful and had no children but had dozens of nephews of nieces all of whom used to regularly kidnap her because she was so small. They would come and pick her up throw her in the back of a utility truck drive from Utopia station into Alice Springs take out Emily plonk her on the pavement outside the jeans store and go inside and say we've got Emily out there she'll paint you a picture if you'll give her jeans so she was in a sense used a human credit card. These are some of her paintings which recently have been touring Japan. They are the same subject as that painting I showed you from Lajamanu. Again it is the Bush Potato growing underground but the sense of wonder and vercundity and marvellousness of the natural world and just joy is what singled out Emily's work but of course the Northern Territory encompasses not just desert but the stone country which you've been hearing about.If you go up from Darwin to Yirrkala in Arnhem Land here you will find Yirrkala an absolutely extraordinary place and home to the Yolngu people and unlike the central desert Australians the Yolngu have been visited for millenia by the Macassans from Indonesia so it has been much easier for them to assimilate outside influence and they have done so brilliantly. They have always been culturally engaged and you can see here in this bark painting this picture of Baraltja who came out of the water at a fresh water site. Now extraordinarily in some of the coastal areas around Yirrkala in the sea are certain places where fresh water bubbles out and you can actually go and drink freshwater in the middle of the sea. The Yolngu people have worked out ways of characterising and depicting these sacred sites and Baraltja the creator of that site is shown here with water dripping from his arms. Now the different crosshatching that you see here is called Birrian and there's no real English translation to Birrian other than energy. They describe it as perhaps as the flash of anger in a sharks eye or sunlight flashing on leaves reflecting light and so the more birrian a bark artist creates the more magical and important a picture is seen. The tradition of bark painting had been going on simultaneously and before the tradition of central desert painting had become a western medium since the 30's. White people had visited Arnhem land but they hadn't really been able to find much use for it until as you heard in the previous talk Uranium was discovered, but once it was they thought right we must go up there and start engaging with these people. They sent up a politician to go and say to the Yolngu we're coming to build a large Uranium mine just near Yirrkala and the Yolnug were so astonished at this, and said but we have a millenial system of belief we have a civilisation. We have a profound culture, how can you do this? and one night the politician Mr Beasley was sitting on the steps with some of the elders discussing the ramifications of the mine and saying it was going to bring roads and access and healthcare and they bought none of those things; they brought alcoholism and disease. But he was putting a very good case for the mine, and he just cast his eyes over two these two huge wooden panels which were the church doors at Yirrkala and they were absolutely extraordinary. I mean I think it's not too far fetched to compare them to the Baptistry doors at the Florence Cathedral. They were extraordinary and they depicted the Yolngu belief system which is simply that there are two objects Dhuwa and Yirritja. I suppose if you think Yin and Yang but I suppose it's not quite like that. There is absolutely no reason why something is Dhuwa or Yirritja - the Sun is Dhuwa and the Moon is Yirritja. Everything, everything even the marks made by beetles on bark are divided into one of these and it explains all

relationships that the Yolngu have amongst themselves. It's very very complex and very extraordinary the elders started explaining to the politician of the meaning of Dhuwa and Yirritja, and after a while the penny dropped and he realised he was dealing with a very complex and profound civilisation and said actually we can't just drive in there and build this mine because these lands, the creation stories that were depicted in this little bark painting are so extraordinary that you can think of them as a spiders web going across the land and imagine if you put your finger through a spider web and make a hole and break all the fragments, making a mine a mindst in all these songlines that criss-cross the land is the equivalent of doing this so what the white Australians were proposing was devastating to the Yolngu way of life. The big disadvantage was that they couldn't read or speak English or write. So they decided to fight back by doing a painting and it was the first time that a painting was used as a political weapon. They produced two bark petitions, one was Yirritja and one was Dhuwa and on the back they explained why it was so important why their country was left intact and remember we are talking about countries, these are proper countries which were being invaded. So these two petitions were sent off to Canberra with everybodys thumbprint on the back of them, and I'm sad to say that they had no effect. Ironically, today if you go to Canberra you will see them hanging in pride of place in Parliament House. But the Yolngu were not to be defeated. They then took Nabalco, the mining company to Court in 1971 in a landmark case called Milirrpum and others versus Nabalco and the Commonwealth of Australia; they lost, but it was the first time Aboriginal people had made a stand for their land or their culture. Yirrkala is not the only place that you can visit in Arnhem Land to see bark paintings Kunibidji people also live at Maningrida which is on the other side, about a 20 minute flight from Darwin. The art from Maningrida is, as can be seen by this bark painting by John Mawurndjul is famed for its beautiful beautiful cross hatching. Now each of these lines is drawn with 3 hairs of the head tied to a stick and using crushed ochre dug from the ground. The ochre is crushed and mixed with water and then the stick is put in it and drawn across the sheet of bark which has been prepared and flattened by fire. Now it's absolutely impossible to draw a straight line like this for Europeans yet John Mawurndjul has such sureness of hand that he just draws these lines like this and he doesn't lift his hand from painting until the line is finished and they're quite beautiful and dazzling. This had previously been used as I showed you on body painting, on initiations and ceremonies for land renewal but it was also painted on bark and you can see here the clan design for John Mawurndjul. Here is a burial pole, you will see these now in the Northern Territory up in the stone country. When a Yolngu dies his body is put a tree until the bones are clean and then the family might be given a finger or toe bone or whoever wanted some of it then the rest is crushed up then put in hollow log coffins which are painted in the clan designs using natural ochre. They are then taken out into the bush and are planted in the forest where the termites will eat them and they will gradually gradually return to the ground but during the period the bones are in a tree or off the ground in a platform the whole community will stop and celebrate that person who has died. Everyone will talk about him, memories both good and bad and they will just honour that person while his body decomposes Maningrida is also home to a womans movement. A lot of the paintings I have shown you are done by men and initially it was men who produced these sacred designs however in Maningrida recently, some of the women have started producing things and here is a little lino cut just done on a small lino tile by Susan Marawarr; John's sister to represent two string woven fibre bags for catching fish. It's really terrible talking so quickly about such a vast and extraordinary country, it's like talking about the whole history of European Art in ten minutes. If you think each one of the countries I have mentioned has its great schools of art and has extraordinary stories and creations. Many of which link across the desert and some of these stories can go right from the top down to the central desert and certain people along the way are custodians to bits of them and every, perhaps, 30 years what we call a Corroboree is held where all the people who are custodians of a particular songline or bridge of knowledge come together and enact that story and in doing so the Chingari come out of the ground, mingle with the dancers

in the present and ensure the future. But I'm not able to give you that amount of detail obviously in this short time so we've now just hopped on a short little aeroplane ride over from Darwin to Tiwi; the Tiwi people live on Bathurst and Melville Island. The Tiwi have an extraordinary culture, again quite different from the Aboriginals of central Australia of course. With being close to the sea they have a completely different diet and it probably, just again to give again the European analogy, would not be wrong to say a Tiwi or a Yolngu would have as little chance of understanding a Pitjantjatjara man from central Australia as a Hungarian would a Spaniard, I mean that's how different all these Aboriginal countries are you will be visiting if you go to the Northern Territory. This is a little picture of a Jabiru by Janice Murray; a wonderful young Tiwi artist and it's interesting when people think of aboriginal people as the last, or stone age culture. Janice has started casting her work in aluminium and metal work which is always a mark of a non-stone age people and she was one of the first Aboriginals to actually embrace the medium of bronze casting. That's Janice and her son. Another famous Tiwi artist sort of the Emily of the Tiwi is Jean Baptist Apuatimi, shown here. She visited London in the summer and with her nephew Francis, Jean is really extraordinary and her paintings are a natural extension of her dancing and singing and the whole time she was here in London she was doing the buffalo dance, which is quite alarming if you didn't know what she was going to do. She would sort of step up to you quickly and go "Awhooo". And that was the Buffalo dance. We had a picnic in Regents Park one night and she started doing it and about 20 people joined in. Interestingly enough the previous speaker showed us Wilfred, one of the guides at Oenpelli and a project was taken recently where the young guides who actually hadn't grown up in a traditional Aboriginal culture were taken back to Injalak Hill, Wilfred amongst them and produced a set of etchings. They slept under the hill, they camped there which they didn't normally do and an old man called Lofty Bargeral went with them and accompanied them on this journey. Now Lofty was the last great rock painter in Arnhem Land; he had grown up traditionally before any white intervention painting those rock caves that you saw earlier. This is the Injalak suite produced by Wilfred and the other guides, and interestingly I put this little picture in of a Kangaroo because it was done by Lofty, and he always starts to do this sort of leg here. It's actually become a Kangaroo. But he never knows, he always starts doing this shape, which can become a tail or in this case the legs of two people. But it's kind of extraordinary to think he was the direct continuation of a millennia old tradition and he is the last practitioner of it. He wants the young guides that take people now to look at these Rock paintings to learn and to understand. You can see that they have a great facility but they don't have the level of knowledge and initiation that the old people do. This is one of Lofty's paintings from the rocks transferred onto paper. There are so many countries in the Northern Territory, this is another, and interestingly enough over the past two decades as the painting movement had grown and grown and has been described by Robert Hughes the Time critic in New York, as the last great painting movement of the 20th Century. I believe it is one of the great movements of the 21st Century. But as it has grown in international momentum and also become a billion dollar industry; other communities scattered across the Northern Territory have begun to paint. And this little picture by Regina Wilson from Peppimenarti near Daly River outside Darwin. And again because of the tradition there is basket weaving you can see that her work reflect this weaving and plaiting of twine. Quite, quite different and I suppose it's like comparing a Van Gogh painting to a Dutch 17th Century painting, they are that different the communities and the cultures producing this art. This is the McArthur River in Borrooloola another community that's just beginning to produce art. The McArthur River is one of the last pristine rivers left in Australia. And I'm very ashamed to say recently that Xtrata mining company has just been given permission to divert it by 6 miles, they've actually broken this beautiful, beautiful river which is just indescribably incredible. And they have moved it, and it is of course like I say putting your finger through a spider web – the local people are devastated their dreaming tracks and creation are completely ruined, but the mine has won and it is producing Zinc for sun-tan cream. This is the dancers are Borrooloola they haven't yet got a visual art program really working but they do the

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aeroplane dance here; which you can see the young children doing. They have a wonderful festival which takes place in February I would really advise you to go and see it. Not far from Borroloola; well not far by Australian standards is Ngukurr on the Roper River. Ngukurr is one of the most beautiful places you can ever see. If you go in the dry season there is a road called the Savannah Way which goes from Borroloola to Ngukurr. For 6 months of the year Ngukurr is cut off by flood waters but it is really worth driving along that to this place which is like the Garden of Eden; it has absolutely extraordinary wonderful rock formations; incredible plant life, lagoons just filled with water lilies and you can get that sense of that by this painting here by Gurtie Huddleston, who is a wonderful old painter from Ngukurr, just for the sense of the absolute abundance and magic of the natural world. And here her sister Angelina George is painting flowers where the flowers are bigger than people, bigger than beetles; just absolutely the world bursting out. And Ngukurr is really like this. And if you drive to Ngukurr as I did last Christmas, and it's just like this. You just go over these amazing red escarpments and you look below and the land just goes on forever and there's another one, and another one and another one. And it's breathtakingly beautiful. One of the artists from Ngukurr visited me in London last month; that's Faith Thompson Nelson. And because she sees the most beautiful water lilies in the world, I took her to the National Gallery to show her Monet's water lilies and it was quite extraordinary and she was absolutely lost, she was transfixed by looking at them. And this is one of her paintings of Ngukurr with a water Lily filled billabong in the beginning. Faith told me that the Australian government is thinking of building a new highway from Ngukurr up to Nhulunbuy in stone country; that whole part of the country where Ngukurr and Borroloola has not been open to tourists, it's incredibly inaccessible and difficult to get to. I was rather alarmed when Faith told me this. But she said that she is delighted because as a young woman it will make her feel less cut off, there will more opportunities for people to visit her and see her paintings and that's what she wants. I didn't want to finish on the white man's map again, you can see here the Stuart Highway cutting through the Northern Territory and going off to Borroloola and you can see Ngukurr and then you can see where the new Highway will be going alongside the Arafura Sea. And I wanted to just as my last slide, show a sweet painting of the Ghan Railway which some of you may have taken or may have taken and I put this in again because just the joy and vivacity that the Aboriginal people show the landscape and I love the fact that the emus and lizards are as big as the train and just as important. I think that says it all. Thank you.