

MR R PETERS 1935-2020

The outstanding philosophical thinker of the Gija people in the East Kimberley, Rusty Peters has died in his 86th year. This long tall, thin and reticent man let his painting do the talking after he joined the Jirrawun group of painters in 1997. Previously he'd worked with the Waringarri Art Centre in Kununurra and stood by Rover Thomas's side as the East Kimberley pioneer created some of his greatest art.

Mr R Peters' detailed knowledge of the land and stories grew from his birth beneath a tree on Springvale Station and is reflected in distinctive paintings with traditional red and yellow ochres and black charcoal. He was unswayed by the whites and colours that other Jirrawun artists adopted. While recognisably part of the 'Warrmun style' – where he returned in 2010 after Jirrawun folded - the intricate curves mapping Country and the dark caves and rivers in his pictures are particular to old man's work.

Earlier, he'd proved a champion horse-breaker on Mabel Downs Station, been thrown off Country when its white owners had to start paying him, but eventually found refuge in Warrmun where the East Kimberley painting style developed from the need to illustrate Rover Thomas's famous dream that led to the Goorirr Goorirr ceremony. But always, in the background, were the local massacres of its Gija residents – including the 'Chinamans Garden Massacre' which Peters painted from the stories passed on by his uncle, its only survivor. "White people came from somewhere else", he described in the text accompanying the painting in Jirrawun's 'Blood on the Spinifex' exhibition in Melbourne. "These white people didn't like black people, that's why they were killing them to the west, the south, the north and the east. Only one person liked them, the Chinaman". His other work in that show was 'Blackfella murdered in Australia', a lament for both the people murdered, the languages lost and the devastation the land had suffered from the loss of its original people. His full-blooded commentary included the claim: "When they had killed the men, they took away the women. Then they had light coloured children with the black mothers. These children are sometimes like white people. They do not like us".

Despite this trenchant view of whitefellas, in early 2000 he collaborated as no other First Nations painter has done with the non-Indigenous artist Peter Adsett. Each artist completed seven canvases, taking turns to paint in dialogue with each other's work. These paintings were shown at the joint exhibition 'Two Laws, One Big Spirit' in Darwin, sadly not seen elsewhere. Then in 2015 he was a finalist in the 32nd Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award; and in 2017, three of his paintings were featured in 'Defying Empire', the 3rd National Indigenous Art Quinquennial at the National Gallery in Canberra. In 2018, aged 84, old man painted a 5-metre triptych depicting the Kimberley night's starry skies over Darrajayin, his ancestral land. The beautiful work was acquired by Artbank, where it's currently out on loan.

Peter Adsett later reported that Peters had explained his side of the equation in 'Two Laws, One Big Spirit' : his Law wasn't an abstract concept enacted by distant institutions, but as central to his life as breath itself. "If you don't follow your Law, you're lost", he put it simply. Unsurprisingly, this man didn't just paint Country or story, instead he chose to explore ideas such as the cycle of life and learning that was the core of Gija identity. The result was the eight-panel masterpiece, 'Waterbrain' in 2002 - now in the Art Gallery of NSW. Read from left to right, the canvases present a chronology of the process of birth, growth and learning from conception to adulthood, ending with the weapons and tools that his elders had taught him were essential to know how to make to survive.

Sadly, at the very end of his life, this formidable man was faced with the horrors of a new massacre – that of his culture, rooted in his birthplace site of 'Garnkiny', the Moon Dreaming, painted by him but made famous by his fellow Traditional Owner and well-known artist, his sister Mabel Juli. As I wrote in June, Kimberley Granite Holdings had been mining within the Malarngowem Native Title Area without even the licence given to Rio Tinto to blow up caves in the Pilbara. Peters' response was, "This makes me very worried as I have to give permission for such things to happen on Darrajayin country. I'm not going to stop worrying, white people cutting our culture up".

Worried to death?

I leave the final words to Nicolas Rothwell, writing in the catalogue for a commercial show by Jirrawun in Sydney: "There's a natural tendency for outside observers to assume that all successful Indigenous creators dwell in a prelapsarian world of sunshine, sustained by the traditions of the Dreaming. But in old man's case, this would be a hard assumption to cling to for long, on inspection of the themes and titles of his paintings, on catching the shadows behind his few words. His art's yearning for balance, its quest for the equipoise of theory, stems from an immersion in jagged life".

Jeremy Eccles, 03.08.20

JGM GALLERY

24 Howie Street London SW11 4AY

T +44 (0)207 228 6027 E info@jgmgallery.com W www.jgmgallery.com