



### Book Review

Margie West (Ed.). *Yulyurlu: Lorna Fencer Napurrurla*. Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2011. Pages 128, pb. ISBN 978 74305 009 5.

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This book accompanies the exhibition dedicated to the work of the desert artist Yulyurlu, Lorna Fencer Napurrurla, which opened at the Drill Hall Gallery in Darwin, Northern Territory, in November 2011. It is also the catalogue for the exhibition of which the editor, Margie West was the curator. It celebrates the work of an Indigenous artist “whose independence as an artist was legendary” (9). Moreover, it offers a comprehensive insight into the making of a highly experimental and unpredictable Indigenous artist whose artistic merit has still not been fully acknowledged.

A short foreword and preface by Louise Partos and Margie West, respectively, are followed by three very different glances into Yulyurlu’s work, by Barbara Ambjerg Pederson, Chips Mackinolty, and Christine Nicholls. This is followed by colour illustrations of the artist’s works, a map of the artist’s country, the artist’s profile, a remarkably elaborate glossary of Warlpiri terms presumably compiled by Nicholls, an international bibliography on the Western Desert art, a note on contributors, and acknowledgements.

Barbara Ambjerg Pedersen’s “Story for Lorna: Lorna Fencer Napurrurla” encapsulates her five-year experience of working with the artist from the time that she became Manager of Mimi Arts and Crafts centre in Katherine in 2001. The text reveals Lorna as the “catalyst for the successful resurrection” (13) of the centre, which had to be closed down during the 1998 floods. Though meeting Lorna when she was in her late seventies or early eighties, with almost seventy years of artistic experience behind her, Ambjerg

Pedersen's memory of Lorna is that of an extremely vibrant artist whose artistic style and creative act matched her character. This "ultimate colourist", as Lorna is frequently called, would create in *furor poeticus*, picking the moment as well as the means of her own accord. Ambjerg Pedersen vividly remembers what being "not quick enough" for Lorna meant: if the canvas had not been prepared, Lorna would have painted on the cement slab of the verandah or on cardboard boxes (15). Keeping up with her, as the author states, was often hard, while working with her was never boring. However, when it comes to the content of her art, Ambjerg Pedersen depicts Lorna as entering "into a world of her own, singing her stories and occasionally using a clapstick to beat her time" (15). This serious culture woman, as we are told, was "driven to repeat, over and over, the stories of her ancestral Jukurrpa" (16). Although Ambjerg Pedersen's contribution offers a glimpse into Lorna's final creative years, we still get an image of Lorna as a "fiercely independent freelance artist" (16) who cared more about her culture than the promotion of her work, which often exposed her to the "local backyard entrepreneurs" (19).

Lorna's earlier years as an artist, the 1980s and early 1990s, are recalled in "Memories of Yulyurlu" by Chips Mackinolty, an arts advisor, journalist, writer and graphic artist. Mackinolty remembers how he first met Lorna in 1981 during his trips to Lajamanu, and recaptures subsequent meetings with the artist in Katherine and Darwin. Unlike Ambjerg Pederson's contribution, which ventures into analysis of Lorna's artistic style and creative act, Mackinolty's anecdotal snippets of personal encounters with Lorna are more intimate and direct, comprised of interesting recollections of his deep relationship with the artist and the women of Lajamanu. We learn in brief that in the early 1980s the craft at Lajamanu was mostly focused on so-called "material culture" (23), which changed in the late 1980s with the introduction of dot-dot painting leading to the "explosion of artistic production ... of which Lorna was a key" (23-4). His description of Lorna and other Warlpiri women whom, as he claims "you don't mess with" (24), though seemingly humorous, is marked by deep respect.

Finally, the most extensive and comprehensive contribution to the study of Lorna comes from Christine Nicholls. Entitled "PAINTING ALONE: Lorna Fencer Napurrurla", the text represents an elaborate and culturally exclusive insight into the making of Yulyurlu. This should not come as a surprise because apart from being an internationally acclaimed scholar in the area of visual art and Indigenous copyright, Nicholls is at the same time not your typical scholar buried in the bookshelves, but one that "goes bush" and becomes part of the local community, which she did when she worked as a linguist and then as Principal of the local bilingual Warlpiri Lajamanu School in the Tanami Desert from 1982 to 1992. Very much in line with Nicholls's previous texts on Indigenous Australian artists, such as her award-winning 2001 study on Kathleen Petyarre, Nicholls's contribution to this catalogue leaves nothing to be desired even for the most demanding of Indigenous art lovers.

Nicholls starts her text by explaining how she got to know the artist, and the distinctiveness of Lorna's character is not explained through the lens of some Western individualism or whimsical nature, but in terms of the extent to which Lorna was "trammelled" by the Warlpiri kinship system. It immediately becomes apparent that Nicholls's framework of reference is to be based upon her own experience with Lorna and the Warlpiri community (testified also by the rich Warlpiri glossary included at the end of the book) as well as on extensive field research obviously done for this edition. What lies ahead is specific life writing and "art writing" about Lorna divided into

several subheadings. The first two offer genealogical and geographical mapping of Lorna's previously undocumented early years, and mature life. In spite of the usual absence of records, Nicholls still manages to spin a credible yarn about Lorna the little girl, Lorna the young woman and Lorna the mother, owing to her friendship with Lorna and personal communication with Lorna's extended family members. The latter yarn, that of Lorna the mother, is as heart-wrenching as it gets, which is why Nicholls signals by the end of her essay that painting might have enabled Lorna to "temporarily obliterate the tragic and premature loss of eight of her ten children" (61).

The major part of Nicholls's text represents a bold and unique attempt to analyse Lorna's work according to her most frequent subject matters connected to her Jukurrpa (Dreamings). Each topic (the Yam Dreaming complex; Two Kangaroos Dreaming; Water or Rain Dreaming; Lover Boy) explains whether Lorna inherited the right to own and paint specific Jukurrpa maternally or paternally, and indicates the importance of specific Jukurrpa for the local ecosystem. Nicholls uses her considerable knowledge of Indigenous culture stemming from her extensive experience of working with the community and interaction with Indigenous women, to try to explain to the cultural outsider in a simple, although not simplistic manner the culturally specific content of Lorna's work. The reader learns not only, for instance, why the Yam Dreaming represents the focal point of Lorna's work as an artist but also what individual motifs used by the artist represent, what a specific use of colour codes connotes and how this is intertwined with the Yam Dreaming narratives. Nicholls literally enables the reader of the catalogue to browse through reproductions of Lorna's plates in the catalogue and understand, at least to a certain degree, what specific images represent, which gives this visually lavish publication an added value. Nicholls does this not to "sell" Indigenous art but to prevent or at least minimise what a Western critic would call *intentio lectoris* resulting in overinterpretation or reading into the text what is not there, which is frequently the case when the text and the reader, or in our case the artefact and the viewer, do not share the same cultural code. Moreover, Nicholls is a model example of cultural correctness, indicating for each claim where, when, how and who she has got it from.

The final subheading of Nicholls's study of Lorna focuses on the artist's place in the visual art movement at Lajamanu and in Australia. Though constructed as a case study of the art movement at Lajamanu, the text also reflects the ups and downs of the Indigenous art movement in general, or what Nicholls identifies as "the 'snakes and ladders' nature of that largely unsatisfactory state of affairs" (59). Juxtaposing the work of the "do-gooders" and "carpetbaggers" with Lorna's attempts to meander between the two reveals that the Indigenous artist is more often than not a funambulist. Finally, Nicholls wraps up her study with Lorna's position within the Indigenous art movement and why we should celebrate this artist.

Instead of "unmasking" the artist or weaving an interpretative net over her work, Nicholls's contribution in this book constructs a multivalent mosaic of a woman who "In making art ... tapped into the most intimate structures of her life, keeping at bay an anarchistic and perhaps even a nihilistic streak" (61). Ultimately, Nicholls's text invites us to discover Lorna's art for ourselves.

In conclusion, *Yulyurlu: Lorna Fencer Napurrurla* is not just a catalogue of an important exhibition honouring the work of a unique Indigenous artist, but also a study of the making of a Warlpiri artist whose work, as Nicholls signals, demands "switching between levels of understanding, and away from what was happening immediately

around her” (61). With full colour illustrations and personal recollections of Lorna as well as the insights into the intricate cultural milieu of the artist, this is more than an ordinary catalogue and will undoubtedly become a very useful reference for future admirers, students and teachers of Lorna Fencer Napurrurla’s work and of Aboriginal art of the Central Desert in general.

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