

EVERYWHEN ART

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Billy Thomas

Birth date: 1920

Birth place: Billiluna, WA

Language:Wangkajunga

Billy was born around 1920 in the bush near Billiluna, WA. His group had no contact with outsiders. He saw his first Gadia (white people) as a young boy when he was cooking a goanna and a stockman rode up to him on a horse and offered him an apple. As a teenager he worked as a stockman droving cattle along the Canning Stock Route. At one point he met up with the late Rover Thomas who was then a young boy filling water buckets at Kuka Banyu (Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route). The two worked together on and off during their time on the Canning. Around the time of the Second World War, Billy's stock work brought him to Derby where he was hired as a police tracker. Travelling unarmed through the bush in search of fugitives he often had to subdue them with his bare hands. During one of his "holidays" from police work he was shot through the leg by a crook at Rugan (Crocodile Hole) near Turkey Creek, WA and has walked with a limp ever since. After his days as a tracker, Billy went back to stock work and worked for many years as a drover before retiring to the Mud Springs Aboriginal community near Kununurra, WA.

Billy did not begin painting until 1995 when he walked into Waringarri Arts and asked if he could have some 'cardboard' (as he calls canvases), to paint on. His work depicts the landscape and the Dreamings of his traditional country around Billiluna and along the Canning Stock Route, incorporating Western Desert iconography with a vibrance and energy that is uniquely his own. Having held several successful solo exhibitions, including two sell out shows with William Mora Galleries one in 1997 in Melbourne and the other in Sydney in 1998, Billy has emerged as one of Australia's leading Aboriginal painters.

As a senior medicine man, Billy's role was crucial in traditional ceremonies, decision making and the initiation of boys into Aboriginal law. Subsequently, his knowledge of sacred sites, stories and ceremony was immense and in some of his painting, comprises a major part of the 'hidden' iconography. For the uninitiated, familiarity with this information is inappropriate. The artist 'dots' over the entire work and scrapes back parts of the white ochre to uncover only the aspects of his history and knowledge he wishes to reveal.

It is unusual for an artist to paint ceremony but Billy focused on this and its relevance to Aboriginal culture: the diversity of its origins, the making of the country, the importance of places and the movements of the creatures that made the country. Billy died in Kununurra in his 90s in 2012. For several years before he died, he worked with his son Lloyd Kwilla to instruct him in the stories he inherited. A fine young painter in his own right, Lloyd continues the tradition of his father, painting in softly coloured ochres that focus on his own place - Kulyayi in the Great Sandy Desert.

Exhibitions

1996 13th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, Northern Museum and Art Galleries, Darwin

1996 William Mora Galleries, Melbourne

1996 Gallery Gondwana, Alice Springs

1997 William Mora Galleries, Melbourne

1997 14th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, Northern Museum and Art Galleries, Darwin

1998 15th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, Northern Museum and Art Galleries, Darwin

1998 William Mora Galleries, Sydney. Held at the Mary Place Gallery, Sydney

EVERYWHEN ART

everywhenart.com.au

EVERYWHEN ART

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

1999 16th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, Northern Museum and Art Galleries, Darwin

2000 Cowara House, Brisbane

2000 17th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, Northern Museum and Art Galleries, Darwin

2001 Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne

2001 Thornquest Gallery, Gold Coast

2001 Red Rock Art, Cullen Bay Gallery, Darwin

2001 Red Rock Art, Depot Gallery, Sydney

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Museum and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Darwin

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Kerry Stokes Collection

Mary Macha Collection

Australian Capital Equity, Perth

Wesfarmers Collection, Perth

Edith Cowan University, Perth

Kununurra Police Station Public Art Project, Kununurra (Commission)

Halls Creek Police Station Public Art Project, Halls Creek (Commission)

Private Collections in Australia, Japan, Germany, USA, Belgium and France