

EVERYWHEN ART ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Rover Thomas



c. 1926- 1998

Place of Birth: Yalda Soak near Gunawaggi (Kunuwarritji), Well 33, Canning Stock Route WA

Language: Kukatja/Wangkatjungka

Rover Thomas was one of Australia's most important Australian painters of the last half of the 20th Century.

In 1990, only about eight years after he had started painting, Thomas represented Australia (with Trevor Nickolls) at the Venice Biennale.

His work is outstanding in contemporary art, along with that of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, for offering both an entirely new interpretation of landscape and groundbreaking style of Aboriginal art. Underpinning Thomas's minimalist forms is a strong narrative which integrates traditional beliefs with modern events, such as Cyclone Tracy which devastated Darwin and the north of Australia in 1974.

For Thomas, events of the recent present were as significant as those of the distant past. A man of strong character and forthright views, as Wally Caruana, curator of his 1994 solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia noted, he held an 'abiding, strong sense of social justice'.

This is most graphically seen in paintings based on the 1920s and 30s massacres of Kimberley indigenous people, such as those witnessed by his adopted aunt and fellow artist Queenie McKenzie at stations including Ruby Plains, Texas Downs and Bedford Downs.

Thomas was born at the tiny Yalda Soak on wa's Canning Stock Route, c.1926. He lived there during the second World War, during which time he met a cattle drover, Wally Dowling, who introduced him to stock work. He lived at Bow River station, near Warmun (Turkey Creek), in the East Kimberley, where he married for the first time; later he lived at Texas Downs Station, Lissadell Station and Mabel Downs Station, where he married a second time. His daughter Jane Yalunga still lives at Warmun.

For more than 40 years Thomas traversed thousands of kilometres of the Kimberley and the NT as a stockman and fencer. Later, he would cut a colourful figure at exhibition openings around the world wearing the Aboriginal stockman's 'uniform' of wide-brimmed hat and colourful neckerchief.

Thomas's paintings stemmed from the constantly evolving modern day Kimberley *Gurrir Gurrir* (*Kurirr Kurrir*, *Krill Krill* and other spellings) song/dance/painting cycle. He was the main singer/teller of this story 'gifted' to him by the spirit of an old lady who had died in a car accident before Cyclone Tracy. The cyclone had been taken by many Aboriginal people as a message from an ancestral rainbow serpent of the necessity to maintain

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cultural practice. As the ceremony's narrator, Thomas supervised the paintings of the boards used in the ceremony by Warmun residents such as Paddy Jaminji. Perth-based arts and crafts officer, Mary Macha, who worked in the area, persuaded Paddy Jaminji and others to make some of these boards for exhibition and sale.

Thomas started painting some years after this in the early 1980s.

The reductive imagery and powerful spatial elements in which he mapped the country and landforms, such as the dramatic Wolf Crater and the many large lakes and water forms in the Kimberley, in ground inky charcoals and dusty brown and yellow ochres, immediately captured public attention when first exhibited in Perth (including in *On the Edge: Five Contemporary Aboriginal Artists*, AGW, 1989) and other capital cities from the mid 1980s. Frequently their planar qualities have been compared to those of the colourfield abstractionists of the 1960s NY school. Thomas had never seen these works, but as curator Caruana related, on seeing a large colourfield Mark Rothko for the first time at the NGA, after looking at the painting intently, Thomas exclaimed, 'That bugger paints like me!'

Interest in and collecting of his art soon snowballed. A highly independent man who had had a lifetime's experience travelling and managing his own affairs, Thomas worked with the Kununurra-based Aboriginal-owned Waringarri Arts Centre when it was established in 1985 as well as with a number of dealers and galleries throughout Australia. He travelled around Australia and internationally and continued painting despite health problems, almost until he died. In 1996, in a trip organised by Waringarri Arts Centre's then manager Kevin Kelly (later owner of Red Rock Art, Kununurra, and executor of Thomas's estate), Thomas revisited his Yalda Soak birthplace on the Canning Stock Route. The trip revitalised his spirit and resulted in a last great series of paintings. He died at the nursing home in his home community of Warmun, aged 83 on Easter Sunday, 1998.

Thomas's works were exhibited in leading galleries around Australia and internationally from 1989. In 1994 the NGA held the solo exhibition *Roads Cross* and works from the Holmes à Court collection formed the basis of the major touring exhibition, *Rover Thomas: I Want to Paint*, National Gallery of Victoria and touring most of the state galleries in Australia, 2003.

Thomas's work was selected for many major group exhibitions from 1987 including *Innovative Aboriginal Art of Western Australia*, Uni. WA, Perth, 1988; *The Great Australian Art Exhibition*, 1988; *Adelaide Biennale*, AGSA, 1990; *Balance 1990*, QAG, 1990; *Flash Pictures by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists*, NGA 1991; *Crossroads: Toward a New Reality, Aboriginal Art from Australia*, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan, 1992; *Images of Power*, NGV, 1993; Aratjara, Düsseldorf and touring, 1993–94; *Nangara*, touring internationally from 1996; *Marking Our Times: Selected Works of Art from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection*, NGA, 1996; *Abstraction: Signs, Marks, Symbols*, NGV 1996; *Spirit Country*, San Francisco and touring, 1999–2001; *Painting the Land Story*, NMA, 1999; *Aboriginal Art in Modern Worlds*, NGA, 2000; *Federation: Australian Art and Society 1901–2001*, nga, 2001; *True Stories*, agnsw, 2003.

Awards: John McCaughey Prize for Painting, NGVN 1990

Represented: NGA and all state galleries; Anthropology Museum, Perth; Robert and Janet Holmes à Court Collection and numerous other significant public and private collections both nationally and internationally.

(Biography from McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art, Miegunyah Press/Aus Art Editions, Melbourne 2006)