

## The Visual Sanctity of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Warlugulong*

*Warlugulong* (1977) is an acrylic painting on canvas by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri that measures 202 cm x 337.5 cm (79.5 in x 132.9 in). This stippled abstract painting was painted during the Homelands Movement that began in the early 1970s in which Aboriginal people started leaving their large, imperialized communities and began settling back into their ancestral communities, one of the reasons being to preserve their culture and ancestral knowledge that is closely tied to the land (Skerritt lecture, 2/22/21). It is around this time that Aboriginal art grew increasingly abstract especially amongst the Papunya, or Desert Painters. The Aboriginal concept of dreaming became significant in this type of painting as it links the visual and sensory experience of landscapes with the essence of ancestral spirits (Skerritt lecture, 2/22/21). In *Warlugulong*, Tjapaltjarri uses concentrations of contrasting colors, dots, and evidence of bodies to create a dynamism that carries the viewer throughout the entire canvas in such a way that might suggest it is depicting a dream, or a landscape saturated with active ancestral energy.

*Warlugulong* contains colors such as yellow, red, pink, orange, brown, black, white, and gray that are typically clustered together in dots that create organic shapes. The bright colors dominate the top, left half, and bottom registers while the black, white, and gray are concentrated in the middle right register. Meandering parallel white and yellow lines that resemble rivers divide the canvas into four sections, but the clusters of colors fragment the canvas even more. The warm colors that envelope the rectangle of cool, dark colors creates a striking contrast that instigates an stark shift in mood. The focal point of the canvas is a burnt orange starlike shape with teardrop shapes emanating out of it in the center of the painting. My first impression was that this was a compass to help the viewer navigate their way around the painting, but this obscure shape can represent various other images like a star or the sun. Additionally, there is a

total of sixteen circles in the painting—two that are a solid white and gray like the moon on opposite sides of the top register and fourteen that are small concentric circles that vary between gray and brown—as if marking an important site. This painting’s use of contrasting areas of color is reminiscent of thematic maps that illustrate one subject by using different gradations of color to indicate areas with higher and lower concentrations of something. Colors also have the effect of creating depth in the painting as the lighter colored clusters appear to hover over the canvas like clouds and the darker colors look like the ground. The colors in *Warlugulong* that compose dispersed organic shapes has the effect of forcing the viewer’s eyes to wander so as to identify similar areas of color as if the viewer were searching for points on a map.

It is interesting to note that instead of using *rarrk*, or crosshatching, that is a common technique throughout the history of Aboriginal art, Tjapaltjarri decides to use dots, which produce a similar shining effect although a more recently developed style. The dots energize the painting as they bleed outward beyond the edges of the large canvas. The dots show motion and energy like clashing atoms in a tight space. They create tension throughout the painting as well since they are small and carefully arranged close together but do not overlap to create cohesion. Since the dots are not overlaid on top of one another, more attention is drawn to the fact that this is an abstract dot painting that is more concerned with producing a certain mood than it is with realistically representing something in the physical world. Even though this painting might vaguely look like a map that denotes areas connected to specific ancestral spirits to me, what is most significant is not the sacred and secret inside knowledge of the painting being depicted but the way it is illustrated with tightly packed dots on the verge of bursting forth with life.

Indexes such as the intersecting paths of pawprints and footprints imply a close relationship between animals, humans, and the land. Perhaps they tell the story of an animal

being hunted or an animal that is part of a ceremony. They are hints of life that show this is still an active area. The prints put the painting into perspective as the viewer looks on from a bird's-eye view. Another suggestion of human activity is the three human skeletons that are camouflaged in the painting. They are noticeable because Tjapaltjarri uses fine brush strokes to paint them instead of dots, but they are also hidden because they blend in with surrounding colors. The skeletons might signify that the remains of important clan members are buried here, or they might indicate the location of certain people's deaths. Between the dots that might represent ancestral energy and the implications of animal and human activity, this painting appears to layer the metaphysical and physical worlds on top of one another.

The colors, dot technique, and bodies evident in *Warlugulong* all work together to create palpable energy and movement. Even though we do not know what exactly we are looking at, we get an intuitive sense that it is something sacred. Abstraction allows Aboriginal artists to preserve the spiritual significance from noninitiated members while still being able to evoke the feeling that we are observing inside knowledge we will never be privy to (Skerritt lecture, 2/22/21). This is similar to when we consider the westernized notion of dreaming in that we do not know what exactly our splintered memory of our dreams at night mean as a totality, but we are still left feeling a powerful emotion upon waking up.

