

Aboriginal artist and activist Mr Tjungurrayi helped bring on-country dialysis to remote communities

ABC Alice Springs

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PHOTO: *Tingari men at the site of Ngarru, acrylic on linen (2007).*

The death of Mr Tjungurrayi, one of Australia's most outstanding contemporary artists, in December has gone largely unnoticed outside the Aboriginal art community.

He was a senior artist in the remote communities of Balgo and Kiwirrkurra in Western Australia.

Advice to Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders that this story contains images and audio of deceased people.

Mr Tjungurrayi started painting in the 1980s, but much of his success flourished after he moved to Kiwirrkurra and was painting for Papunya Tula Artists — the first community-run Indigenous art centre in Australia.

His works, which depict stories from sites surrounding an area west and north-west of Kiwirrkurra, are held in international collections, including the Harvard Art Museum in the US.

Mr Tjungurrayi's paintings have also been exhibited in China, Germany, Singapore, London and Brussels, and around Australia.



PHOTO: *Tingari men at the site of Ngarru acrylic on linen (2011).*

Tim Klingender, senior consultant on Australian art for Sotheby's in London, paid tribute to Mr Tjungurrayi's talent.

"He was a consistently outstanding artist who produced many exceptional paintings," he said.

"[This began] in the late 1980s at Balgo, right through to his large-scale, vibrantly coloured masterworks produced in his final decade that won him the prestigious Western Australian Premier's Indigenous Art Award in 2008.

"His late large-scale canvases were always keenly sought after by collectors, and sold for prices upwards of \$80,000."

First contact with whites



PHOTO: *Mr Tjungurrayi's family with the survey helicopter on the Canning Stock Route in 1957.*

Mr Tjungurrayi's story is also one of first contact with white men in 1957, in this instance a group of surveyors led by John Veevers.

When he was about 14 years old, Mr Tjungurrayi and his family saw a helicopter land and in 2017, through his son Raymond Olodoodi, he described what he saw at Well 40 on the Canning Stock Route.

"They thought it was a dragonfly and they ran away to hide in the trees," Mr Olodoodi said.

"[Mr Tjungurrayi] was scared of that machine, the helicopter machine, and he was hiding in the sand dunes and watching that helicopter.

"The pilot saw that they were running; they were running away scared. After they camped there for one night, the next day they came back.

"That pilot was making the flour, damper. The pilot saw them. They were standing [so] he counted the people and he told them to come [for food]."

Out of sight, out of mind

John Carty, head of humanities at the South Australian Museum, was a friend of Mr Tjungurrayi's and collaborated with him on their 2015 book, *Beyond Borders*.

Professor Carty remembers the legacy of Mr Tjungurrayi's artwork and wonders why mainstream Australia does not seem to be aware of his work.



PHOTO: *Tingari men at the site of Ngarru, acrylic on linen (2011).*

"It's really sad when someone like Tjungkurrayi passes, but it also should give us real pause to reflect on the extraordinary lives and the really giant human beings who walk among us in Australia and who are often invisible in mainstream consciousness," he said.

"He encountered a helicopter for the first time and thought it was a giant dragonfly.

"He walked to the desert by himself — just him and his dog Puuki — for a year as a teenager. Imagine that."

Professor Carty said Mr Tjungkurrayi moved to Balgo, a Catholic mission, and became someone who was able to move between Indigenous and western cultures.

"He becomes a leader in his law and then he becomes one of Australia's great painters over the last 20 years," he said.

"He wins all kinds of prizes, he transforms Western Desert painting and he also manages to transform people's understanding of dialysis and renal disease and the health bureaucracy in Central Australia."



PHOTO: Mr Tjungurrayi received treatment in August 2017 at the Purple House in Alice Springs. Image used with family permission.

Professor Carty laments the fact that many Australians are not aware of Mr Tjungurrayi.

"He's just led this enormous life and most Australians don't know his name, so I think it's really important now that he's left us that his legacy is understood," he said.

Accessing on-country dialysis

Mr Tjungurrayi had a long affiliation with Western Desert Dialysis' Purple House in Alice Springs, a not-for-profit organisation that has given renal patients the opportunity for on-country dialysis.

Registered nurse Sarah Brown was not only a friend of Mr Tjungurrayi's, but is also chief executive of the Purple House.

"In the late 1990s, people from Kintore and Kiwirrkurra were desperately worried about family members having to leave their community to come to Alice Springs three times a week for the rest of the lives," she said.

"Alice Springs is Arrente country; there's a strong concept of people living in shame on someone else's country [and] being lost here."

She said out of that grew the idea of renal patients being able to access dialysis on-country.

"So Papunya Tula artists and Tjungurrayi, who was one of the shareholders for the company, decided they would raise some money to try and get a dialysis machine in

Kintore [in the Northern Territory] so that people from Kiwirrkurra, Kintore and Papunya and Mount Liebig [could get treatment].

"Tjungurrayi was one of the major participants in creating a magnificent painting, which we call the Kiwirrkurra men's painting.

"It was a big collaborative work; it became the most important painting for an auction [for the] Western Desert Dialysis Appeal."



PHOTO: *Tingari men at camped at Myilili, acrylic on linen (2006).*

The auction, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2000, was officiated by Roy and HG.

The painting was bought by Kerry Stokes for \$340,000, and more than \$1 million was raised for the dialysis centre.

Beyond borders

By 2009, Mr Tjungurrayi's own health began to deteriorate and he was diagnosed with end-stage renal failure.

"At the time, the Northern Territory Government was having trouble with capacity for new dialysis patients in Alice Springs, so Tjungurrayi was actually told he couldn't come to Alice Springs to start dialysis," Ms Brown said.



PHOTO: *Mr Tjungurrayi painting along the Canning Stock Route.*

This meant he would not be able to use the machine he had helped fundraise for almost a decade earlier, and time was critical.

He was living in Kiwirrkurra, just over the Territory border into Western Australia, so plans were made to fly him from there to Alice Springs, then Perth, then Kalgoorlie to see a kidney doctor, before flying him home again.

"Tjungurrayi just couldn't understand why anyone would want to do this to him," she said, adding that he refused to go.

"We had a battle on our hands to make governments change their mind to allow him to come to Alice Springs to start dialysis before he died."

Mr Tjungurrayi did not have months, let alone years, for decisions to be made.

After several weeks of lobbying the Northern Territory and the Western Australian governments, Mr Tjungurrayi finally had a result.

"I think it took three and a half weeks before he was quietly put on a plane to come to Alice Springs to see a kidney doctor to start preparing for dialysis," Ms Brown said.

Saying goodbye

In December, eight years after that battle with governments, Mr Tjungurrayi had a heart attack at home in his community and was flown by Royal Flying Doctor Service to Alice Springs Hospital.

Ms Brown was initially not concerned about her friend after seeing him.

"He was orientated and chatty and really pleased to see me and I thought 'This is going to be a piece of piss'," she said.

However, his prognosis was not good and doctors said when they stopped his medicine, he would likely die.



PHOTO: Mr Tjungurrayi and Sarah Brown at the Purple House in Alice Springs.

"I actually got quite a bit of time with him after he died, while we were waiting for the doctors to come and make his death official," Ms Brown said.

"Family had left, they'd come and they kissed his forehead and they'd cried and they'd rung their other family out bush.

"So, it was just him and me and I got to wash his body and talk to him while I was doing it.

"I got some lovely time with him to say goodbye properly after he died. I said that I'd miss him and that I promise to try really hard to do the things that he'd asked me to do."

Ms Brown took comfort when she left the hospital with his bible, a coin, and his ID card, which stated that he had no address in Alice Springs and lived at Kiwirrkurra, over the northern border in Western Australia.