

Beyond Dot Paintings

By Amy McQuire



In the Gulf of Carpentaria art is being used to push back against a Swiss mining company and a whitewashed view of history. Amy McQuire reports.

They say the pen is mightier than the sword. But when the other side holds not only the power of the pen, but all the public relations and legal representation money can buy, you look for other weapons in your arsenal.

For senior Garrawa elder Jacky Green, who has family ties to the other three clan groups Gurdanji, Mara, and Yanyuwa in Borroloola, in the southwest part of the Gulf of Carpentaria, that weapon is the softer, but no less powerful, bristles of his paintbrush.

“It was in me all the time. I used to (paint) at home for myself. But then I thought how am I going to get my voice out? I can’t read and write. So I do it through painting,” he tells New Matilda from Canberra, where he has undertaken a phenomenal trip to teach the lessons of his country to students at the Australian National University.

If you want to learn black history, you are forced to read between white lines. But Mr Green’s paintings tell a devastating story of dispossession and voicelessness.

The cries of his people bleed through his canvases in the tradition of other artists from Gulf country. They paint over white history books that use words as weapons to conceal the Aboriginal blood spilt in the pursuit of white economic development.



Jacky Green

White history slanders his freedom fighters as murderers; it confines the massacres of his people to the margins.

But the paintings of Gulf artists like Mr Green have long told unapologetic truths.

Australian National University anthropologist Dr Sean Kerins tells New Matilda these truths are not prized by the usual market for Aboriginal art, which gives preference to non-confrontational, beautiful paintings.

“White people don’t want to know about the dispossession. When they go for art, they want the Dreamings. And the Gulf people won’t give them that,” Dr Kerins says.

“...People agreed in the 80s that they wouldn’t paint Dreaming paintings. It was to be history paintings and paintings of country.”

The stories incorporate the conflicts following the first waves of dispossession, when vast swathes of country was stolen and placed under large pastoral leases.

“Many of the rivers, streams, creeks and wetlands were taken over by the cattle. These places were at the heart of Indigenous economic activity. Essential Indigenous food resources along with important cultural sites were damaged by thousands of cattle,” Dr Kerins told a seminar at AIATSIS this week.

“With the foods quickly disappearing, some waters fouled by cattle and the rotting carcasses of bogged animals, some Aboriginal groups mobilised to resist the destructive aspects of capitalism that sort to eradicate their livelihoods and associated complex web of ecological and cultural systems. “To defend their place and protect their waterways and sacred sites and replace vitally important lost food resources, Aboriginal people speared the cattle. The consequences of European development were swift and brutal as the settler colonisers sort to eliminate the Indigenous population with shooting and poisoning.”

It is estimated about 600 Aboriginal men, women and children were murdered on these killing fields. It was about 1/6th of the population.

Gulf artists paint these stories to remember, because what is happening in the past to their country, is happening today.

Since the 1950s, the area has been subject to mining exploration, beginning with Mt Isa Mines, who, along with the NT government, opposed one of the first land claims lodged by the clans under the newly minted NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the 70s.

The local clans won only a partial victory, with the judge knocking over some parts of the claim due to lack of traditional connection, and the NT government excising the middle islands in anticipation of a town that never eventuated. Instead, a port was built on the mainland near Bing Bong.

While the four clans never had full control over their traditional lands, the extent of their dispossession was revealed following the controversy over the McArthur River Mine expansion. In 2003 Swiss mining giant Glencore Xstrata took over the lease, and proceeded to roll out plans to convert the underground operation into an open pit mine, which would require a 5.5 km diversion of the McArthur River – a life-source to local mob.

Traditional owners were vocal in their condemnation of the plan, taking their case to both the Federal and Supreme courts who decided in their favour. The NT government passed emergency legislation overturning the result of the Supreme Court. In 2009, the federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett approved the mine.

The diversion was completed despite vocal black opposition. Xstrata continued work on diverting the river even while the matter was proceeding through courts, Mr Green says.

A 2006 leaked NT Treasury document showed the mine had never made a profit or paid a royalty to the NT government. Despite this, the NT government had given the mine a subsidy of \$5 million for electricity. The subsidy was worth almost \$100 million over the life of the mine.

Meanwhile, the damage to country has been extensive. Last year in October, the Independent Monitoring Consultant released a devastating report into the environmental impacts on country stemming from the mining operations.

It found a large waste rock pile at the site, which produces clouds of sulphur dioxide could “have long term impacts on groundwater, surface water quality, and terrestrial and/or aquatic ecosystems near the mine site.”

Fish caught in the diversion channel of the McArthur River has already tested positive for lead at levels that exceed the maximum permitted by Food Standards Australia New Zealand.

The mining company is fundamentally failing in its duty to help preserve the country the local people have looked after for tens of thousands of years.

“When we first heard there was lead in that water, we got really worried about what’s going to happen, how soon are people going to be affected by that lead? Aboriginal people especially from the four clan groups, the river is like a garden to us. Aboriginal people go there all day, they stay there and fish,” Mr Green tells New Matilda.

“They stopped for a couple of days, but they continued – they knew there was lead there but they still need that fish.”

It is like another form of dispossession, with Traditional Owners unable to exercise their right to care for their country, to practice their ceremony on their ancestral lands or to access their sacred sites.



Jacky Green, *Expansion of Open Cut Mining at McArthur River Mine*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 117 x 198 cm

In one of Mr Green’s paintings ‘Yarding Us In Like Cattle’ he says: “to stop Aboriginal people to protect that land, they yard us like a cattle into that little place they built for us.

Sometimes no water, sometimes no showers. If they put us all in there, it gives them the right to do what they want to do with land.”

He illustrates Xstrata as ‘white ants’.

“That dozer or the mining company is like the white ants,” Mr Green told an AIATSIS seminar recently.

“When white ants get in they eat the roots of the tree... he comes in and kills that tree. It’s just like Aboriginal people... you take one Aboriginal people out of there, you’ll kill him, you’ll hang him.

“I felt no good... if you was out there, living in the same country I’m living, you’ll see a lot of damage, that’s why we hurt inside as Aboriginal people, I think you’d do the same if you were from that country.”

While Xstrata and the NT government continually expect Aboriginal to abide by white law, they refuse to acknowledge black law.

“As an Aboriginal person, we respect that land,” Mr Green tells New Matilda.

“Even if we go on another person’s country, we get approval from them and they say when we go there, what to look for, they advise us where to go and where not to go. We respect each other when we go into that land, plus we have the same sort of knowledge when they come to our country. “With mining companies, all in their mind is that they get in there and they dig the land up. Get all the money they need and they’re gone. They don’t care about what the damage is.”

But they still expect Aboriginal people to respect the company’s own policies.

One area of deep hurt is the inability to access cultural sites within the boundaries of the mine, which sits on traditional Gurdanji land.

“One of the things that makes me upset, and some of the old people is when we go into visit the site, our law gives us the right to go in there because that’s our sacred site,” Mr Green says.

“But we have to follow that policy of the mining company. We have to tell them one or two days earlier. But we should be allowed to go in there, as long as they’re not working. They’re very strict.” If they refuse to comply, Mr Green says the mining company will call in the cops. It happened before in 2007, when police were called in from Katherine to keep traditional owners out. They were trying to access the site for ceremony.

Mr Green feels the whole community lives in that shadow of the big mining company. When he tried to get to Canberra, he was refused a seat on the mining company’s plane, even though he later heard there was at least seven spare seats.

He was forced to instead to take the 12-hour long drive to Darwin to fly down south. That’s why he puts his stories in paintings. They are powerful illustrations of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless; evocative examples of the different ways Aboriginal people view country – not as a resource to make money off, but as a sacred entity that must be cared for to sustain Indigenous health and wellbeing.

In fact, Mr Green sees his country as needing Aboriginal people just as much as they need country. Aboriginal people must manage the land through burning, in order to prevent bigger and more destructive bushfires.

While the narrative around mining in Aboriginal communities is centred on the right of Aboriginal people to economic development, at the expense of the right to practice culture and care for country, the reality is, it is often Aboriginal people who are left with not only the financial cost, but also the environmental, ecological and cultural cost of white greed.

“Environmentalism of the poor they call it. It is the poor who are carrying the cost of these developments,” Dr Kerins tells New Matilda.

“That big waste rock pile will be there forever.... It has 18 metres of clay compacted on top of it, poorly done. Eventually the rain will wear it down like the rain and the wind wears down the rocks and the mountains, will expose all of that and it will end up in the waters, and people will lose their food. And it’ll be native title rights they’ll be losing.”

Mr Green says sadly “in the future, it will be all gone. It will be weaker and weaker.”

All of this comes back to the privileging of white, capitalist knowledges over diverse, and devalued Indigenous knowledges, Dr Kerins says.

“In the Gulf, Aboriginal perceptions of the environment encompass a universe whose ecology consists of many diverse forms that include spirit beings, or ancestral aspects of flora and fauna, human beings and natural phenomena all of which interact with each other,” Dr Kerins told the AIATSIS seminar. “Aboriginal peoples in the Gulf view the environment with meaning making practices that define and regulate social life concerning economy, ecology, personhood, body, knowledge and property whose protection and maintenance is vital to wellbeing.”

He says that such relationships are “not valued and rarely seen in large scale development processes.”

“Indigenous cultural meanings and practices are rendered meaningless by settler colonisers.”

They are placed outside of the market “and are made invisible,” he says.

One man whose concerns were made invisible up until his death in 2011 – Gurdanji senior elder Harry Lansen - spoke about how the mine impacted his wellbeing, and his family’s wellbeing: “That mine been affecting me and my family and all my kids. All of them kids look small now. Not like ceremony people. We just only nothing, because of the mine. It took the life away from me,” he said just before his death.

“They take away my land away from me, mining company. They just worried about this: money money money all the time. I’m not worried about money. I’m worried about that land, and what that land do for me.”

Jacky Green’s paintings are not about money. They are not about entering the market economy or building an Aboriginal art industry.

They about preserving his stories, and the stories of his peoples’ struggle to protect their land, to fight against the modern-day dispossession of big mining companies.

“I want to show people what is happening in this country and to Aboriginal people,” he said recently. “No one is listening to us. What we want. How we want to live. What we want in the future for our children. It’s for these reasons I started to paint. I want government to listen to Aboriginal people. I want people in the cities to know what’s happening to us in our country.”