

Michael Eather

16th December 2020

Vale: Kumantye Nelson Jagamara (also known as Tjakamarra, Jakamarra)

(c. 1946-2020)

It is with profound sadness that I share with you my reflections with the recent passing of Jagamara. Not only was he an internationally acclaimed artist and cherished family member, he was also a truly revered friend and inspiration to many.

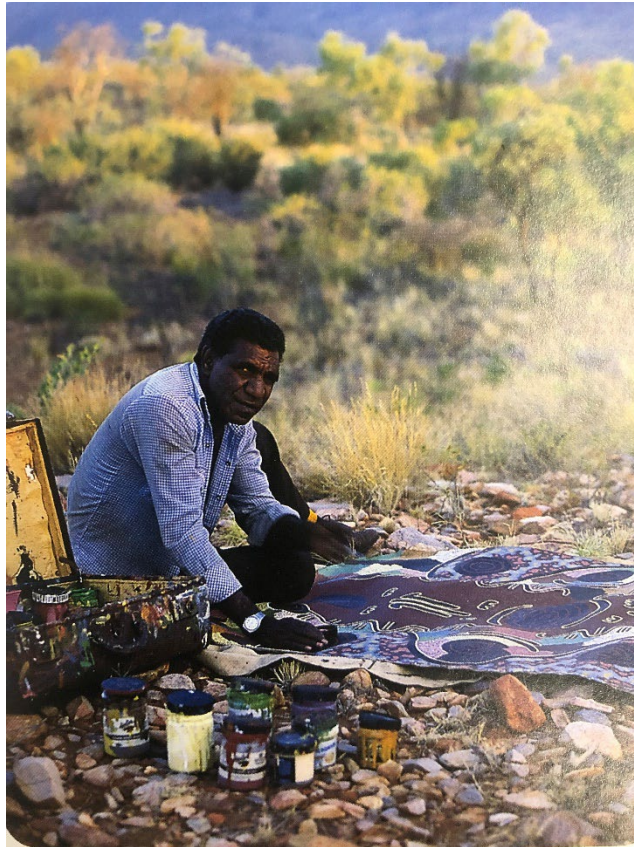
Jagamara commenced painting in the early 1980s in Papunya, Central Australia. A second-wave artist of the internationally renowned Western Desert art movement, he painted stories - taught to him by his grandfather Minjina Jakamarra - for Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd. He remained a shareholder of this company throughout his life. Much of Jagamara's work focused on the Dreaming stories of the Mt Singleton area, including: *Kangaroo, Yam, Possum, Bush Turkey, Goanna, Flying Ant, Rainbow Serpent* and *Lightning*. In 1993 he was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia for services to Aboriginal art.



Jagamara seated at front centre at school, Yuendumu, c1950s (Image courtesy Mrs Pat Jennings)

Noted author and friend of Jagamara, Vivien Johnson writes:

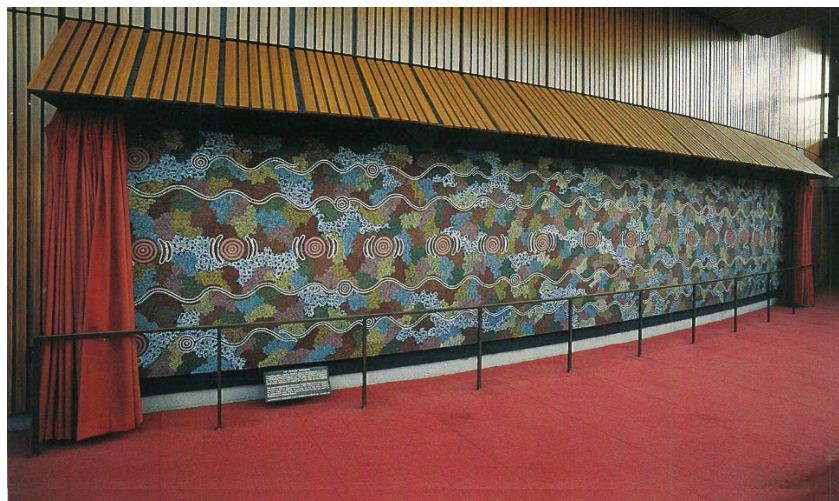
"Jagamara left school in Yuendumu at 13 after his initiation into Warlpiri law. He travelled north, driving cattle, shooting buffaloes on the Alligator Rivers, even a short stint in the army before heading back to Warlpiri country, settling finally in Papunya... Seeing him operate with effortless command of the English language and Western cultural mores, few realised that Jagamara's life journey had begun 'foot walking' across his ancestral lands with his extended family."



The artist in Papunya, c.1986 (Image courtesy Neil Mcleod)

Jagamara's first major achievement was winning the (inaugural) 1984 National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (now the Telstra NATSIAA) with the painting *Three Ceremonies*. Following this, his career as an artist immediately soared, encompassing national public and corporate commissions, subsequent international recognition, and even celebrity status. The artist's astonishing list of achievements during the 1980s is illustrated in Johnson's words:

"His inclusion in the 1986 Biennale of Sydney made him the first Australian Indigenous artist to break through into contemporary international art circles and achieve individual recognition. In 1987, an 18-metre painting by Jagamara was installed in the foyer of the Sydney Opera House."



***Possum Dreaming* 1987-1988 (Image courtesy Sydney Opera House Trust)**

Prior to this Sydney Opera House commission, Johnson writes:

"His 1984 painting Five Stories was one of the most reproduced works of Australian art in the 1980s – and remains so. It featured on the cover of the catalogue of the landmark 1988-89 Dreaming's: The Art of Aboriginal Australia, the first major exhibition of Indigenous Australian art in the United States since the 1950s."

At a Sotheby's London auction in 2016, *Five Stories* was made available for sale for the first time since being first exhibited in 1984. The painting was purchased by a private collector in the USA for AUD\$687,877 establishing what was then the highest price achieved for a living Indigenous artist.



Jagamara with granddaughter Rosharni, signing *Five Stories 1984* a limited edition print series, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane, 2016. The painting on the wall is one of a series of collaborations between the artist and Imants Tillers (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery & Mick Richards Photography)

Back in Australia, it was in the late 1980's that the artist's focus shifted to Canberra. Johnson continues:

"Central to his legacy is the Parliament House Forecourt Mosaic, now a national icon, featuring on the \$5 note. Jagamara stood beside the Queen and then Prime Minister Bob Hawke at the 1988 opening ceremony, explaining this gift from his people to all Australians, most especially his fellow Aboriginal Australians."

Some thirty years later in 2017 Jagamara was invited back to Parliament House, this time with fellow acclaimed artist Imants Tillers, for the exhibition *Meeting Place*, featuring solo and collaborative works including *The Messenger 2014*, purchased for the Parliament House Art Collection.



Left: Jagamara in front of detail shot of *The Messenger* 2014 Parliament House, Canberra, 2017 (Image courtesy DPS Auspic)

Right: The artist stands on Parliament House Forecourt Mosaic, Canberra, 2017 (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery)

In 1996, Jagamara made the first of many trips to Brisbane. Alongside fellow Papunya artist Paddy Carrol Tjungerrayi, he was featured with Campfire Group artist collective in *"All stock must go!"* for the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT2), at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG). From 1997 onwards, the Campfire studios in Brisbane enabled Jagamara to begin experimenting with new compositions via drawings and mixed media on paper.

He was invited back as a solo artist for the APT3 in 1999. These Brisbane visits cemented diverse creative and professional relationships, with Jagamara zealously developing new solo works and collaborations. With Tillers, the collaborative series began in 2001, now totalling over 24 works. The artists first met in 1986 at the Biennale of Sydney whilst both exhibiting at the AGNSW, where Tillers' work *The Nine Shots* featured recontextualised elements of Jagamara's *Five Stories*.

Tillers reflected in 2018 on this experience: "... what was maybe a 'mistake' on my part in 1985 [the unauthorised appropriation of an Aboriginal image] led later in 2001 to the beginnings of a long and fruitful process of collaboration with Michael Nelson Jagamara, which still continues today. Some have described it as 'reconciliation through collaboration'."



Jagamara and Imants Tillers at QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2018 (Image courtesy QAGOMA)

From the late 1990s until his passing in 2020, Jagamara's expressionistic 'signature' designs were also translated into prints, rugs and sculptures. Jagamara continued to make the salient point that, his stories have never changed, although the appearance of his artworks - colour, style, scale and materials - were continually being reformatted.



Jagamara with Michael Eather and Bruce Maclean standing in front of *Lightning* 1997 QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2018 (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery)

The *Lightning Strikes* sculpture series, which began in 2014, is one such example. Fabricated firstly into polyurethane and later into bronze and stainless steel editions, the sculpture is based on an image distilled from the Warlpiri artist's *Rain & Water Dreaming* narrative.



Jagamara with *Lightning Strikes* outside Blackbird Bar & Grill, Brisbane, 2015 (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery & Mick Richards Photography)

Jagamara's contributions to the arts have been recognised throughout his career with a host of accolades. In 2006 the artist was the winner of the prestigious *Tattersall's Club Landscape Art Prize*, for his painting *Moving Storm*. Shortly after this, in 2008, Jagamara received an honorary doctorate from the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales.



Moving Storm 2006, winner of Tattersall's Club Landscape Art Prize (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery & Mick Richards Photography)

In 2020, Jagamara collaborated with BMW again (the first time being 1989) on a contemporary work for wrapping a new model X5 BMW car in a promotion for the *Sunshine Coast Art Prize*, for which he was a finalist. The original painting was subsequently acquired for the collection in the Sunshine Coast Regional Gallery.

Regarding the earlier BMW collaboration, Johnson wrote:

"The same year, 1989 Jagamara joined luminaries such as Calder, Warhol and Rauschenberg in BMW's 'Art Car' project. His meticulously painted Dreaming designs transformed an M3 motor-race machine into the definitive 'Aboriginal Art Car'."



Jagamara's *The Old Men* featured on a BMW X5 SUV, 2020 (Image courtesy Coastline BMW)

The artist will always be remembered as a bush gentleman. Adorned with his jacket and Akubra hat, Jagamara displayed a marvellous humour and forthright dignity, whilst all the time sharing a multitude of Indigenous stories. From Papunya to New York, Alice Springs to Canberra, Brisbane to Vienna, Jagamara would often enjoy quiet, confident chats with strangers, whether he met them casually at the airport or hotel, at gallery openings, waiting for a taxi or just meandering through a shop. He would usually introduce himself with a warm smile and a shake of the hand, announcing *"Hello, I'm a famous artist."*

Kumantye Nelson Jagamara is survived by his wife Marjorie Napaltjarri, children Roseanne, Maree, Regina, Julie, Jonathon and Sharon, his grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Jagamara, what a legend! We will all miss you, the world over.



Michael Nelson Jagamara, Brisbane, 2018 (Image courtesy FireWorks Gallery & Mick Richards Photography)

All Vivien Johnson quotes are extracted from the following sources:

- Johnson, V. 2021. 'Obituary: Michael Jagamara Nelson (c. 1947-2020) *"Without the story the painting is nothing"*', published in the Sydney Morning Herald, 16 December 2021, pages 304-308
- Johnson, V. 1997. *Michael Jagamara Nelson*. Published by Craftsman House G+B Arts International.