



POSSUM STORIES

MICHAEL NELSON JAGAMARA

Front cover: Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Possum classic*, 2013, acrylic on canvas 90x90cm (detail)

Back cover: Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Confused possum*, 2000, acrylic on linen (16 panels each 40x40cm), 160x160cm

Photo: Mick Richards

Possums, as totemic animals, are sexy beasts in Aboriginal spiritual terms. They stay up at night, are playful, furry, cuddly, mischievous, noisy, cheeky, athletic and full of life.

Jagamara's mural (at the Sydney Opera House) is prescient in its subject matter, full of the spirit of place, and powerfully appropriate on this site, the cultural performance space on Tubogowle. A space of sonic resonance where possums play.

*- Djon Mundine 2023
for Sydney Opera House Trust*

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MICHAEL NELSON JAGAMARA

2 October - 21 November 2026

Exhibition Notes & Anecdotes

This exhibition focuses on the Possum Dreaming as portrayed by legendary Warlpiri artist Michael Nelson Jagamara (1946-2020). The story itself is anchored in Warlpiri mythology that Jagamara draws on in numerous seminal works. Many have since become embedded in recent art history, revealing the intergenerational significance of Dreaming stories for today.

For Jagamara, this Dreaming holds particular significance for several reasons. Primarily, it manifests a critical mythological story central to the kinship structure and tribal law of the Warlpiri and the surrounding First Nations tribes. Shakespearian in grandeur, the Possum 'Love Story' acts as a parable for one of the oldest taboos in human history, that of harmful unions or 'wrong skin coupling,' a law which when transgressed is punishable by death. Clearly, the Possum People in the story are spirit beings, not merely the cute variety that populate our suburban backyards and local forests.

Back in 1987, Jagamara's name became amplified around Australia when he was invited from the outback to the dress circle of Sydney, after being freshly commissioned by the Sydney Opera House Trust with the Bi-Centenary Commission to paint a significant work to be installed in the Joan Sutherland Theatre Northern Foyer. Indeed, *Possum Dreaming* (1987), Jagamara's magnificent 10-meter magnus opus was unveiled in 1988. This prestigious occasion was the same year when Jagamara, dressed in an Armani suit, was invited to greet Queen Elizabeth II and the Prime Minister Bob Hawke to unveil Meeting Place, his historic winning commission, installed as the Forecourt Mosaic at the New Parliament House in Canberra. The design symbolises where important Dreaming Stories connect. The Possums were there too!



Installation view of Jagamara's *Possum Dreaming*, 1987, at Joan Sutherland Theatre Northern Foyer.
Photo: Euan Carlisle. SOHT ©



Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister Hawke and artist Michael Nelson Jagamara, examine his mosaic, Canberra, 1988.
Photo: Andrew Campbell

Fast forward to the present, this exhibition is also motivated by recent events and connective opportunities that the *Possum Dreaming* (1987) has created.

In 2023, myself and Djon Mundine were commissioned by the Sydney Opera House to each write a story for their webpages to accompany Jagamara's Possum work. It is acknowledged that whilst the Possum Story is known to many Warlpiri representatives, it was Jagamara—then a young but intuitive artist in the 1980s—that translated its elements so gracefully with his distinctive dot and circle iconography. Earlier this year, I was again engaged by the Opera House to help with plans for conservation research of this important work. We agreed to also highlight, conserve and illuminate the back stories that this work holds within it. So, in June, a small team from the Opera House, that included First Nations representatives and myself, ventured out to Papunya and Alice Springs to meet with Jagamara's family, including his eldest son Jonathan and daughter Julie. Here, with the backdrop of the Macdonell Ranges, we remembered the commission, discussing the artwork and process that included assistance by his late wife Marjorie, and the story that underpins Possum Dreaming -its enduring significance to the family today.

As the Opera House team explained to us, *Possum Dreaming* appears to many passing visitors only by night, that is when the curtains are drawn back after 6pm to reveal the artwork. By day, the massive red rubber backed curtains protect the work from direct sunlight that shines across Sydney Harbour through the glass windows of the Opera House. Clearly, it's Possums by night.

Gazing at this work in the here and now, and to then glance back out to the Harbour Bridge and the magnificent bustling watercourse itself, I marvel at the auspicious nature and connectivity of all this history and these epic stories surrounding Bennelong Point. Indeed, I also muse on what other Dreaming stories have been encountered here some 240 years earlier, when the tall ships sailed past...and the times and tides between. Almost 40 years on, Jagamara's painting still appears fresh and alluring; locked in a time capsule of elegance and mystery.

Jagamara's Possum Stories hold clues to deeper narratives heralding cultural acknowledgment of all 16 skin groupings observed by many tribal groups. Namely, they denote the cultural responsibilities for each man and women, and accordingly for family, tribe, and race. These stories might be explained in detail or other times in passing. However, the full knowledge of kinship relationships, their associated laws, their Dreaming places, and their intricate protocols, become second nature to those who grow up within this structure. It becomes a little epiphany for the curious and the concerned, or the casual observer, regardless of one's culture or ethnicity, to discover their archetypal power.



Margorie Nelson and family,
Alice Springs, 2020



Michael with Jacob Spencer, Johnathan Nelson and Euan Carlisle at
Papunya recording Possum Stories, 2026

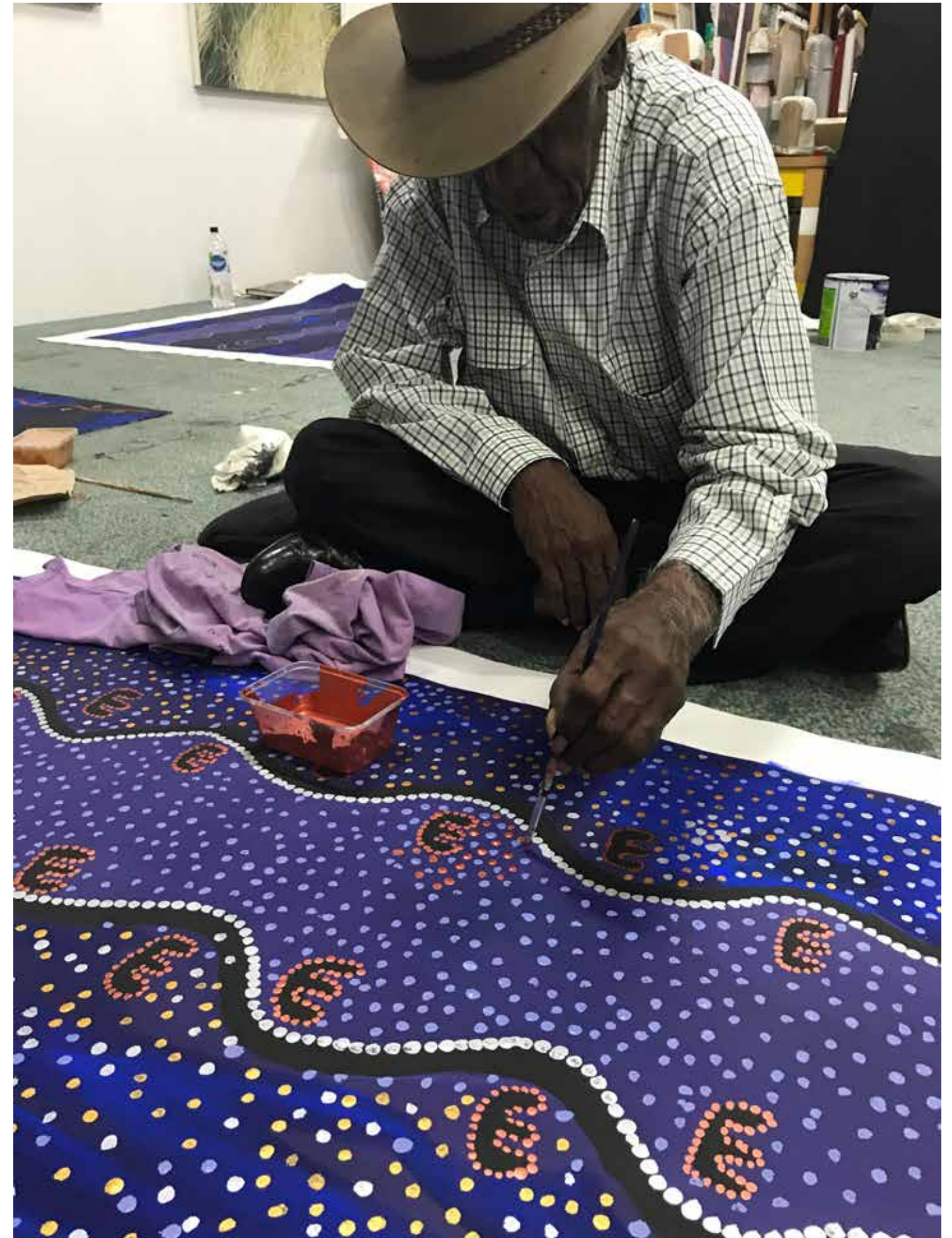
The exhibition *Possum Stories* showcases Jagamara's various treatments of his Possum narratives painted between 2000 and 2019. All have the distinctive Possum track markings including the 'E' as footprint icon. Snaking tracks depict the macro and micro possum people travelling East and West, day and night.

During this time Jagamara often worked collaboratively through Campfire Studios, Brisbane alongside artists such as Laurie Nilsen, Joanne Currie Nalingu and Richard Bell (included in this show), not to mention a significant and enduring collaborative practice formed with Imants Tillers.

Four of these collaborative works with Tillers (new and old) are on display providing extra gravitas to Jagamara's exhibition. These are yet more examples of their 'auspicious entanglements' that espouse connectivity and mystery. Jagamara and Tillers first collaborated directly from 2001, in Brisbane until Jagamara's passing in 2020, completing over 25 works. Several additional works begun in 2019 were posthumously finished by Tillers in his Cooma studio between 2021 and 2026. In 2021, The Tate Modern, London acquired a major collaborative work, *The Call from Papunya*, which featured Jagamara's Possum Story as a central motif embedded within Tillers layered complimentary imagery and texts.



Imants Tillers & Michael Nelson Jagamara with *The Call From Papunya*, FireWorks Gallery, 2018



Michael Nelson Jagamara, 2018

Two collaborative works begun in 2019, but not finished until 2024, are included in this show; namely *Know Yourself* and *Intuition 3* alongside their very first collaborative work *Nature speaks (with Confused Possum)*, 2001. The two new works will enjoy their first viewing in Australia having just returned from the exhibition *Fierce Paradise: Conversations with Aboriginal Art*, shown at Museum im Schafstall Neuenstadt am Kocher, Baden Württemberg, Germany, curated by Hubert Sawatzki and Isidore Tillers.

In one of the fascinating exhibition catalogue essays, *The Painter Who Loves Books: Imants Tillers*, by Ian Maclean, he cites the Possum Story as integral to the artists union:

Tillers' attention was first caught by the Possum Dreaming Men of Mawarriji, a Jukurrpa which belonged to Jagamara as it was his father's and grandfather's Country, for which Jagamara was the ritual boss (policeman or manager). It is famous across Central Australia for its archetypal Possum love stories about the dangers of 'wrong skin' (taboo) relationships, of 'love, transgression, retribution and death', as Vivien Johnson put it. Did Jagamara believe his relationship with Tillers was a 'wrong skin' Possum Dreaming story? Is this why he made the Possum story the subject of their first few collaborations? Is Jagamara's first painting when he and Tillers started their collaborations, which he called 'Confused Possum', a direct reference to Tillers?

I would like to thank and acknowledge all the contributors to the exhibition, *Possum Stories*, which pays tribute to Michael Nelson Jagamara and family. Special thanks to Imants Tillers, Isidore Tillers, Djon Mundine, Ian McLean, Euan Carlisle and Una Rey.

Michael Eather, FireWorks Gallery Brisbane, September 2026



Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers in the Campfire Studios, 2001



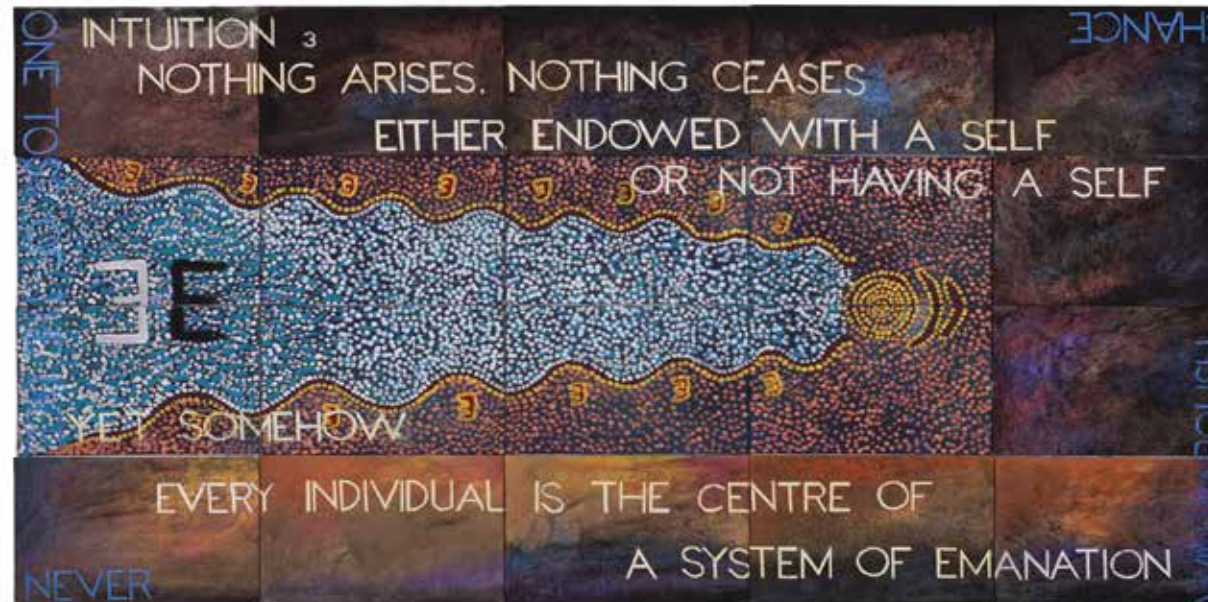
Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers, *Nature speaks (with confused possum)*, 2001, acrylic & gouache on 48 canvasboards (No. 69426 - 69440), 102x426cm

It was while Tillers was living in Cooma that his prolific 20-year collaborative relationship with Michael Nelson Jagamara began. Tillers had, of course, been appropriating elements of paintings by Aboriginal artists since the mid-1980s. 'Jagamara and Tillers first met in spirit rather than in person...when Tillers spied an art magazine advertisement, that reproduced the photographic images of a painting listed as Possum Dreaming by Michael Nelson Tjakamarra.

- Ian McLean, 'The Painter Who Loves Books: Imants Tillers', *Fierce Paradise: conversations with Aboriginal Art*, digital exhibition catalogue, 2025, p. 39

Tillers had 'an intuition' that elements of it and of Georg Baselitz's Forward Wind 'needed to be brought into contact with each other and that I was to be the catalyst of their meeting. Tillers had not asked for permission from Jagamara, and the resulting work, The Nine Shots, 1985 was hugely controversial. Fifteen years later they began a process of 'reconciliation through collaboration' orchestrated by Michael Eather of FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and the Campfire Group collective. Tillers later said 'what was maybe a "mistake" on my part in 1985 led later to the long and fruitful process of collaboration with Michael Nelson Jagamara, which continued until his passing.

- Isidore Tillers, *Imants Tillers: Wildes Paradise: Gespräche mit Aboriginal Kunst / Fierce Paradise: Conversations with Aboriginal Art*, Museum im Schafstall, 2026.



Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers, *Intuition 3*, 2024, synthetic polymer paint & gouache on 20 canvas boards (No. 115975 - 115994), 102x178cm



Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers, *Know Yourself*, 2021, synthetic polymer paint & gouache on 22 canvas boards (No. 112912 - 112933), 121x121cm

FIVE STORIES 1984

In 1984, Jagamara painted *Possum Dreaming* (later known as *Five Stories*). Ian McLean writes, “Jagamara had only been in the ‘art business’ for two years; the art business being a Western enterprise in which several Papunya Tula painters were having recent success... Jagamara was on the verge of becoming ‘one of Australia’s highest profile Aboriginal artists’ and mediators in the wider artworld”¹.

*In ‘Five Stories’ 1984, Michael Nelson Jagamara has introduced a number of pictorial innovations that distinguish the work from other, more conventional Western Desert acrylic paintings of the time. The graphic elements in the picture were outlined in yellow dots as opposed to the usual white to produce a scintillating visual effect akin to that of body painting in ceremony. In fact the black ground of the picture suggests black skin. The infill is constructed of dappled patches of colour as well as the usual arrays of dots. Yellow cloud-like forms contrast starkly against an even black ground in a triangular space in the lower left, reflected above in a blue wash covering the dotted field between the two meandering lines of possum tracks.*²

Wally Caruana

At the Sotheby’s London auction in September 2016, the painting achieved an artist record, and record for the highest price for any living Aboriginal artist; when the work sold for AUD \$687,877 (GBP401,000), more than doubling the pre-sale estimate of AUD\$256,500-\$342,000 (GBP150,000-200,000). The work, offered to auction from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, is considered to be the most significant piece of contemporary Aboriginal Art, and is said to be the most published and exhibited work by any Indigenous Australian artist.

To commemorate this achievement limited edition, signed reproduction prints were created.



¹ Ian McLean, “The Painter Who Loves Books: Imants Tillers,” in *Imants Tillers: Wildes Paradise: Gespräche mit Aboriginal Kunst / Fierce Paradise: Conversations with Aboriginal Art*, Museum im Schafstall, 2026.

² Wally Caruana, (Lot 60, Sothebys London Aboriginal Art catalogue September 21 2016,)



Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Possum love story (diptych)*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 240x100cm



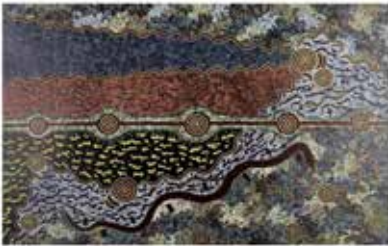
FW4831 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Richard Bell
Confused possum/there is no hope 2001
acrylic & mixed media on linen
120x120cm \$15000



FW10394 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Confused possum 2000
acrylic on linen (16 panels each 40x40cm)
160x160cm \$19800



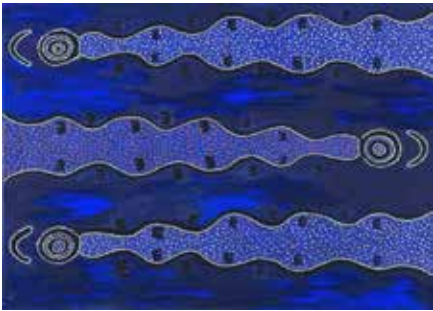
FW13998 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Possum classic 2013
acrylic on canvas
90x90cm \$7000



FW17158 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Five Stories 1984 A/P (framed) 2016
archival ink on Ilford 310gsm rag paper
96x126cm \$4000



FW18335 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers
Know Yourself 2021
synthetic polymer paint & gouache on 22 canvas boards (No. 112912 - 112933)
121x121cm \$47000



FW18338 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Possum love story at night 2018
acrylic on canvas
100x140cm \$12000



FW19089 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers
Intuition 3 2024
synthetic polymer paint & gouache on 20 canvas boards (No. 115975 - 115994)
102x178cm \$43000



FW19410 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Possum love story (diptych) 2008
acrylic on canvas
210x100cm \$15000



FW19976 Michael Nelson Jagamara & family
Possum people 2020
acrylic on canvas
178x68cm \$12000



FW6925 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Confused possum 2003
acrylic on paper
70x50cm \$1500



FW6923 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Confused Possum II 2003
acrylic on paper
70x50cm \$1500



FW6921 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Confused possum III 2003
acrylic on paper
70x50cm \$1500



FW17141 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Five Stories 1984 ed. 5/20 2016
archival ink on 310gsm Ilford paper
96x126cm \$3000



FW17767 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Five Stories 1984 ed. 9/25 2017
archival ink on 310gsm Ilford paper
56x70cm \$2000



FW10151 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers
From Afar 2002
acrylic, gouache on 36 canvas boards (No. 71078 - 71113)
150x210cm \$115000



FW20250 Michael Nelson Jagamara
Possum story 2002
ink on Arches paper
77x57cm \$1500



FW17769 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers
The Messenger ed. 11/25 (Framed) 2017
archival ink on 250gsm Ilford paper
68x61cm \$2200



FWVAL14868 Michael Nelson Jagamara & Imants Tillers
VAL14868 Nature speaks (with confused possum) 2001
acrylic & gouache on 48 canvasboards (No. 69426 - 69440)

MICHAEL NELSON JAGAMARA BIO

1946 - 2020

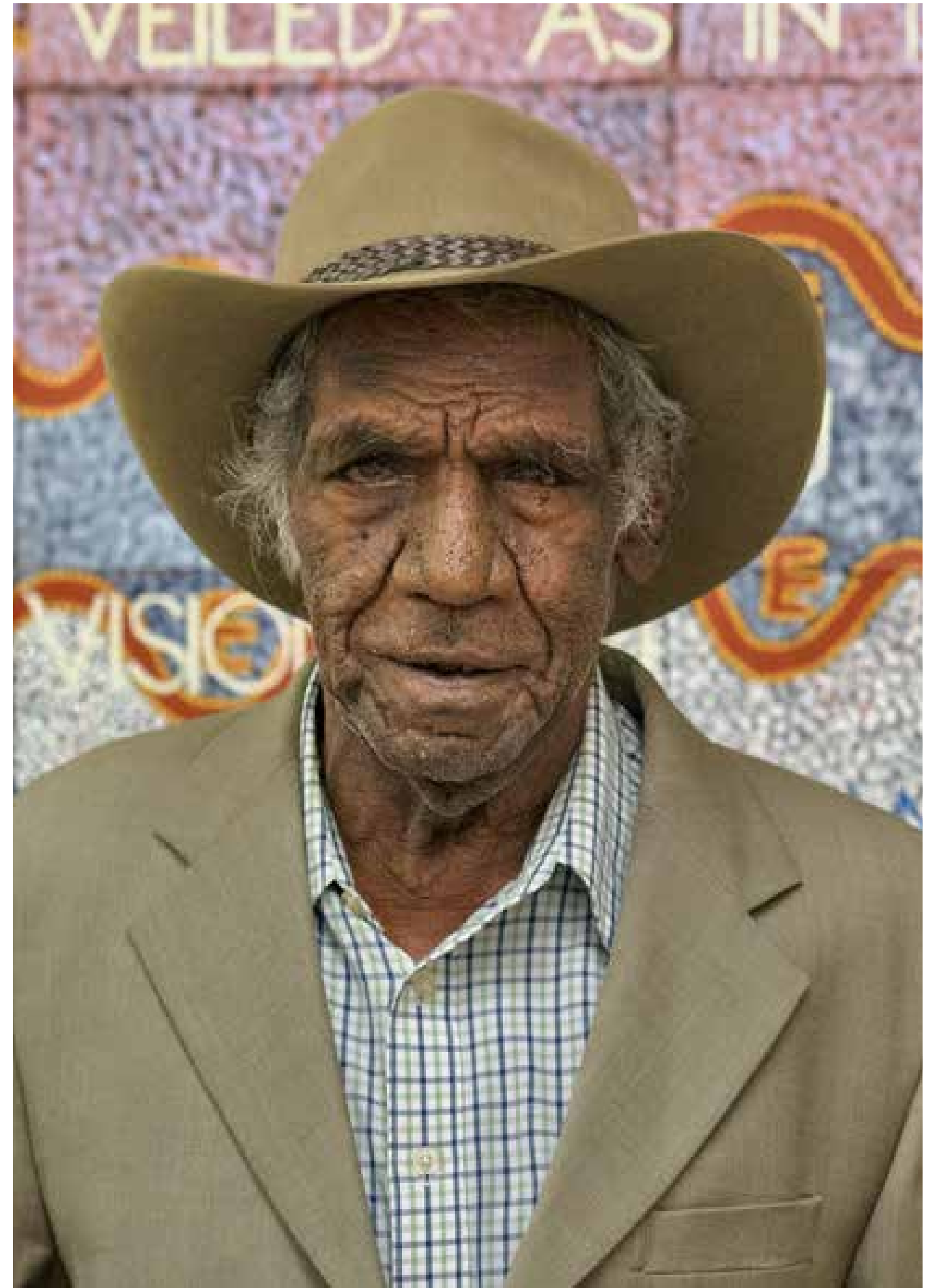
Languages: Warlpiri & Luritja

Region: Papunya, Western Desert NT

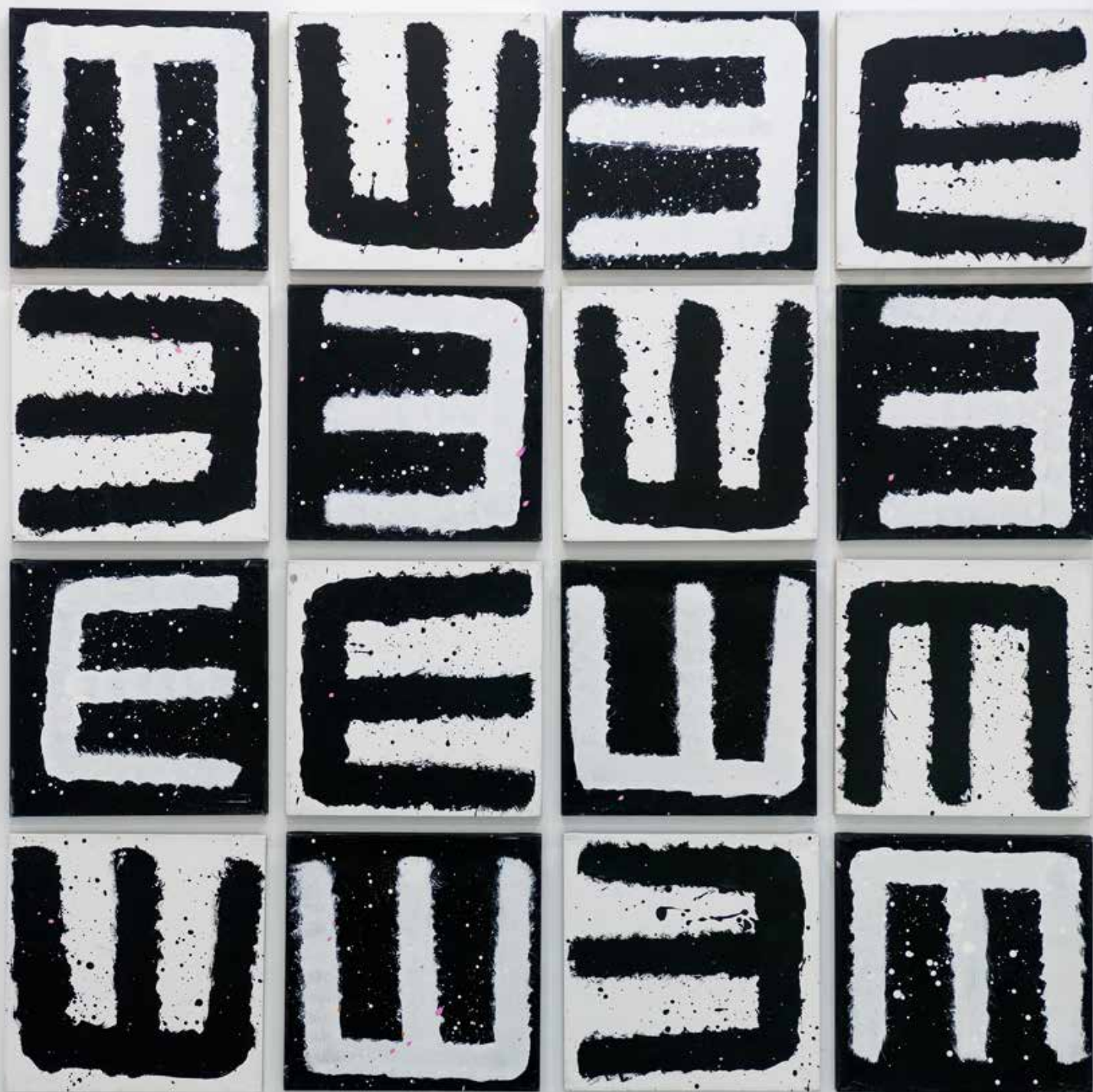
Michael Nelson Jagamara is one of Australia's most recognised and celebrated Aboriginal artists.

He began painting in the early 1980's in Papunya, Central Australia, in the classic dot and circle tradition of desert sand painting. Most of his artwork centres on country and stories from the Mt Singleton area - traditional Dreaming narratives including Yam, Possum, Kangaroo, Emu and Lightning. Michael Nelson was recognised nationally and internationally in the 1980s through numerous public art commissions and awards including the 1984 inaugural National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (The NATSIAA Telstra Prize). In 1987 Michael Nelson was commissioned to complete Possum Dreaming an astounding 10 metre painting installed in the Northern Foyer outside The Joane Sutherland Theatre at Sydney Opera House. In 1988 he completed Meeting Place, the winning design for the Forecourt Mosaic installed at Parliament House Canberra, opened by Queen Elizabeth II with The Prime Minister. In 1989 he was chosen by BMW to participate with international artists in the infamous Art Car project. During the 1990s, the artist gradually reinvented his approach to painting with a more expressionistic style. He continued to make the salient point that although the appearance of his works continually changed, his stories did not.

Michael Nelson's significant contribution to Aboriginal Art was recognised in 1993 when he received the Order of Australia medal (AM). In 2008 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of New South Wales. His works are held in numerous public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia, Parliament House Art Collection, and QAGOMA. In 2021, a major collaborative work with Imants Tillers was acquired by the Tate Modern, London.



Michael Nelson Jagamara, 2019
Photo: Mick Richards



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