

Mipatjunanyi Print Series

Nura Rupert - *Wati Ngintaka*

Wati Ngintaka was having a good night's sleep. He woke up to go to the toilet when he heard seeds being ground on a grinding stone. The sound was exceptionally smooth and soft – a very, very good grinding stone. At daybreak, he took his spears and followed the sound. He rested along the way, halfway to Wallatina.

Early the next morning, he walked around and found a lot of people. They were having a meal and had made damper. They offer him some to taste, but he found it wasn't good enough to have been made on the special grinding stone. He left their camp and kept walking on.

Then one man came with a damper and gave it to him to taste – 'Ai, this is beautiful food!' That man said: 'Brother-in-law, let's go hunting!' They went off together. But Wati Ngintaka hurt his foot on the way, when he stepped on a sharp stick. The man said to him: 'This is still bleeding, you better go back home.' So he went back to camp, pretending he needed a rest. But instead, he moved on to look for that special grinding stone. He found it in a tree near Wallatina.

He made a lot of tracks to confuse the people. He stole the stone and walked away. But a small boy was watching. When people came back from hunting, they discovered that the stone was gone. They were searching everywhere in vain. The little boy told them what happened. A search party set out. They found Wati Ngintaka and searched his body, as he was standing outstretching arms and legs. But they could not find the grinding stone. He had hidden it on the tip of his tail. They let him go, and Wati Ngintaka went further west, carrying the stone on his tail. But people were still following him, hoping to find the grinding stone.

Wati Ngintaka had to go to the toilet again. He put the grinding stone into a tree. Suddenly he heard noise – the stone had fallen down. The people who had followed him brought it down and it broke into pieces. They trampled all over it, breaking it up into even smaller bits and pieces. Wati Ngintaka saw the men and came running with his spear. But he was only one man against many, and he was killed.



Milpatjunanyi - Telling stories in the sand

Wati Ngintaka by Nura Rupert

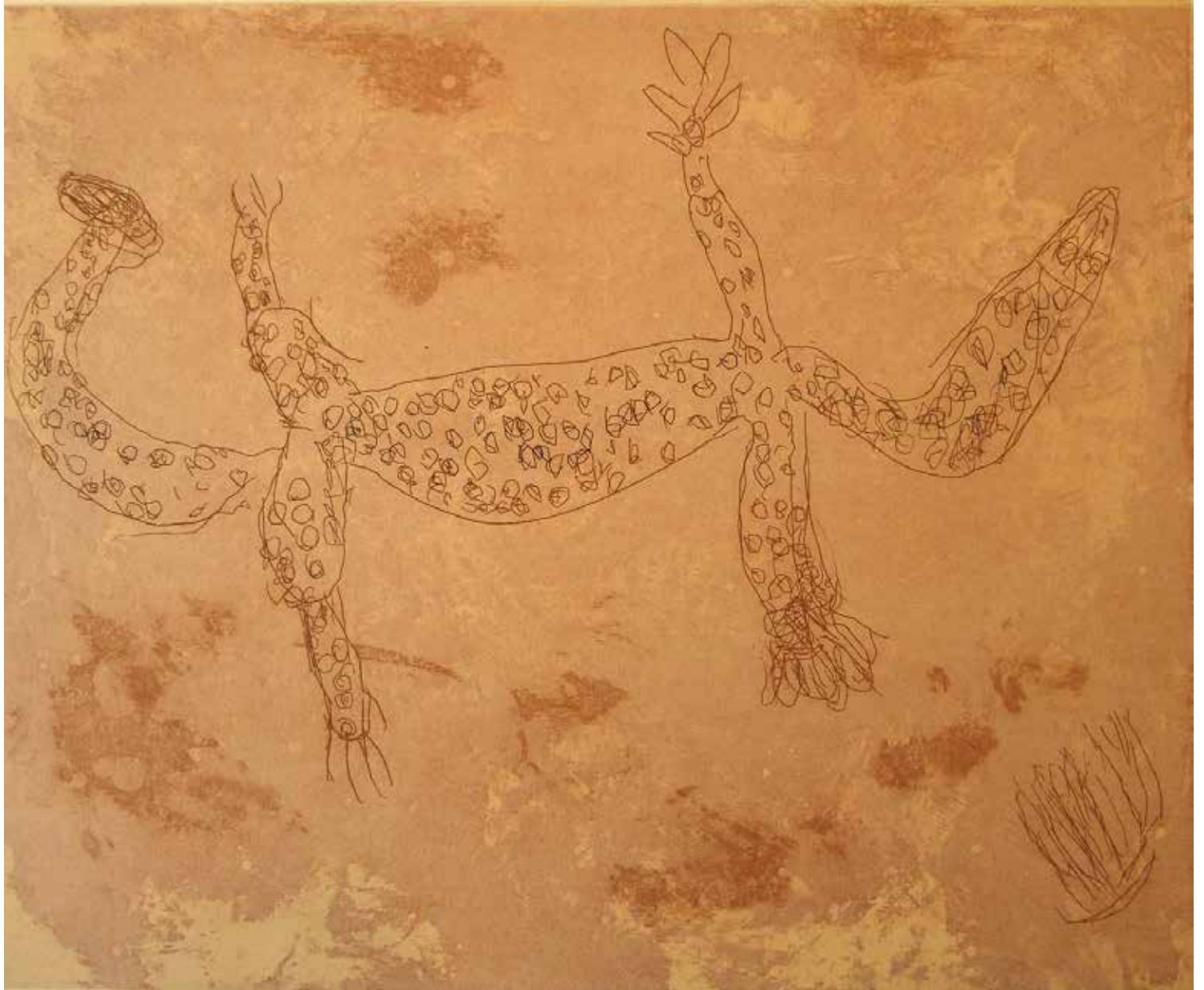
A suite of 12 etchings printed at Northern Editions Darwin in 2007 by Basil Hall, Natasha Rowell, Jo Diggins, Merran Sierakowski and Michael Roseth.

Image size 37 x 40 cm, Edition 9/10

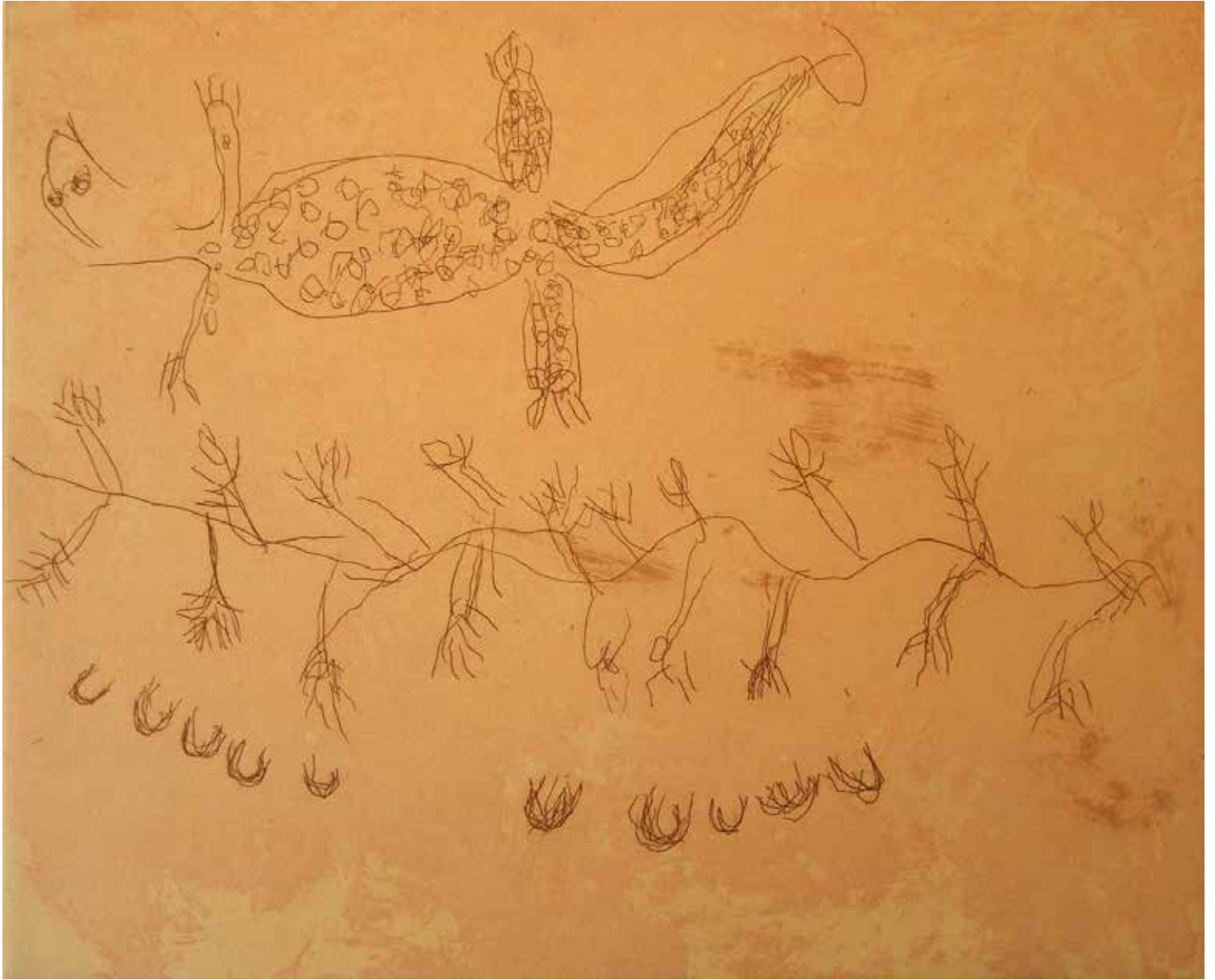
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Wati Ngintaka I



Wati Ngintaka II



Wati Ngintaka III



Wati Ngintaka IV



Wati Ngintaka V



Wati Ngintaka VI



Wati Ngintaka VII



Wati Ngintaka VIII



Wati Ngintaka IX



Wati Ngintaka X



Wati Ngintaka XI



Wati Ngintaka XII

A Story About Sand Stories - Hilary Furlong

The Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara word *milpatjunanyi* (pron. mill-par-june-ah-nee) translates as “telling stories in the sand”. This kind of story telling is the domain of women and girls among the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara speaking peoples of the desert country of central Australia.

Ernabella Arts’ *milpatjunanyi* print project has been developed over the last seven years however its real origin, culminating in this particular contemporary manifestation of an ancient, deeply held cultural practice, goes back seventy years.

Aspects of *milpatjunanyi* in the world of children For the women, the sand on which they sit, the ground across which they walk, and the world over which they pass, has for many thousands of years sustained them and provided the materials and subject matter for telling life’s big and small stories.

Traditionally these stories were often told in the evening, as family groups settled down for sleep in their transitory camp. One woman would take her *mi/pa*, the stick with which she beats the rhythm of the story, and with the other start drawing in the sand, episode by episode, smoothing the sand after each, until the story’s end.

The narratives of the *milpatjunanyi* are mostly allegorical, sometimes including moral or practical lessons, many of them ending dramatically or tragically. They are vivid accounts of family ties, rivalry, infidelity and revenge. They describe the country and involve men, women, children and the totemic birds, animals, and all the beings of the timeless and ever-present *Tjukurpa* (Creation Story)

which is also referred to as the Dreaming. Many *milpatjunanyi* also hold secret/sacred knowledge.

The *milpatjunanyi* performed in the evening family camps – and indeed they are performances, since the narrator plays all the roles of the story’s characters – are open, or stories that anyone can hear. Children, drifting to sleep with these bed-time stories, thus begin to hear and understand the law and the lore of their world.

On other occasions during the day’s food gathering activities, a *milpatjunanyi* session might arise spontaneously. A comfortable shady, sandy place would be found, perhaps some food cooked for everyone to share, and the story teller would begin – at times singing, chanting, laughing, crying. Her audience would characteristically be overwhelmed by the performance.

In the 1930s and 1940s the anthropologists Norman Tindale and Charles Mountford, visited Ernabella and collected drawings* from the children there, to whom they had provided paper, crayons and coloured pencils for the purpose.

Fifty years later, Lucienne Fontannaz, who was curating *Then and Now*, the touring exhibition of Indigenous art, also visited Ernabella. She especially wanted to let the people know of the existence of these unique early drawings.

Together they discovered, looking at copies that Lucienne showed them, that many of the children who had made the drawings fifty years earlier, were still alive and well. There was great excitement and some disbelief in seeing their drawings again. In turn, the community

A Story About Sand Stories - *continued*

disclosed to Lucienne an equally fascinating collection of children's drawings** from the 1940s and 1950s, which they had made as the first pupils at the Ernabella school, and which they declared to be chiefly inspired by traditional Milpatjunanyi iconography. These priceless drawings had been found recently in a box in the art centre store room.

As a result of that discovery Lucienne, together with the artists at Ernabella, presented in 1999/2000 the touring exhibition *Pitjantjatjara Sand Stories - Milpatjunanyi*. Three senior women: Nungalka (Tjaria) Stanley, Manyinka Toby and Nura Rupert, great exponents of the art and ritual of milpatjunanyi, each drew two sand story episodes in specially constructed sand boxes, and these individual drawings in sand were then fixed permanently by a process of extreme trial and error. Thus secured, these single episodes were set in shallow frames mounted flat on plinths, for touring and display. This was a way of showing the authentic milpatjunanyi but the finished boxed items were almost too heavy to tour and the physical integrity of the drawings in the sand remained unstable.

Here is what Nungalka (Tjaria) says about making milpatjunanyi for exhibition

"We make the drawings in the sand and tell stories. We show them so they can be seen, heard, and so they can be learnt. Also, the children become familiar with them and while listening are encouraged to watch and learn how to beat the stick on the ground to accompany the story. They listen and they talk, seeing how the drawings were done.

We are putting on this exhibition now so that when they see it, they will think: 'so that's the

way they told stories in the olden days - their Dreaming stories'. And after us, once we will be gone, the children of future generations will be able to see it..... they may think: 'So, this is how it goes.' The great-grandmothers have kept the stories for them.

We made recordings so that grand-daughters, daughters and great-grandchildren can see them. And when these children grow up, they may think: 'I see, this is our story that they left for us so that we may never forget.'

The old way of living in the Lands has completely changed in the last fifty years. People now live on their Homelands (or Outstations) if they are lucky, or in fixed communities, in houses: a very recent change and with serious consequences beyond the scope of this essay.

Milpatjunanyi has survived this change, and like any authentic art form has been adapted to the lived environment in which it is practiced. The great milpatjunanyi partitioners - the women who were born in the bush and spent their early years living in an almost completely traditional way, are getting old and frail; when they die an irreplaceable form of cultural practice and special experience dies with them.

One of my first jobs as co-ordinator of Ernabella Arts Inc. was taking Nungalka (Tjaria), Nura and Manyinka, to the Adelaide opening in January 2000 at Flinders University City Gallery, of the Pitjantjatjara Sand Stories - Milpatjunanyi exhibition. I was entranced by the drama of the stories, the beauty of the ephemeral drawings, and the skill and elan with which they were made.

A Story About Sand Stories - *continued*

The artists later showed me more and taught me over time. I felt it was urgent to find a way in which these precious ancient stories could be shared, and their special iconography which co-incidentally, is an intrinsic element in the development of contemporary art forms across the APY Lands, be made available in a more enduring form.

I wanted to find a way in which at least some elements of the experience of milpatjunanyi could be made available outside the immediate area of its production.

Limited edition prints on paper, which the artists were beginning to embrace enthusiastically as yet another medium in their impressive array of skills, seemed the obvious path.

Since 2000 the artists, together with our colleague and friend, the master printer Basil Hall, have experimented with different kinds of print making as a medium for showing and sharing milpatjunanyi.

First though Basil had to see the real thing in action, which required bush trips and picnics in the right kind of sandy creek bed, and many experiments and discussions.

Three great artists: Amanyi, Nungalka (Tjaria) and Nura have made the images for these

prints. Each one of these women was born into the world of their traditional culture, and each is the recipient and senior custodian of Tjukurpa.

The world into which they were born has disappeared; the culture which they embody lives on; like all living things it is dynamic and carries the grains within itself of its own evolution.

My thanks and acknowledgement to Lucienne Fontannaz for her work and words; to Louise Partos for "fixing" those touring milpatjunanyi among many other things; to Ute Eickelkamp for her comments, insights and sharing over the last seven years; to Basil Hall and his team for putting up with my obsessions; and first, last and foremost to all the Ernabella artists and community for their patience, generosity and friendship in sharing their lives and their milpatjunanyi.

Hilary Furlong

Co-ordinator, September 1999 -August 2006
Ernabella Arts Inc.

* Now in the South Australian Museum and State Library
of South Australia collections respectively

** The school children's drawings are in the State Library of South Australia and Flinders University Art Museum collections "The stabilized sand drawings are in Flinders University Art Museum collection.

Aspects of milpatjunanyi in the world of children - Ute Eickelkamp

At about two and a half years of age, girls at Ernabella begin to play milpatjunanyi. For them hardly a day goes by without tapping the wire, and it is likely to remain important throughout their lives. The principal elements of the technique are the same as they were presumably, many generations ago: namely to use a bent stick, sit cross-legged on the ground, clear the space in front of the body, and make marks with fingers or stick while 'talking story'.

It is important to say that one of the main purposes of milpatjunanyi also continues to be what it has been for a very long time. As one nine year old girl explained, 'It's for thinking'. However, certain details and narrative genres have changed. For the last few decades wire has come to replace the flexible branch called mi/pa.

Like the wooden stick, the 'story wire' is flexed, and bent into a curve during the performance. It is often carried slung around the neck during the day so that the girl is ready to play at any time. Metal is harder than wood and the new material may have given the movements and gestures a sharper edge. Both tools are associated with shelters - branches with the traditional homes and wire with [modern] houses surrounded by wire fences.

The practice of older women telling children's stories that have been transmitted for generations - as common knowledge or as part of individual family traditions - has moved into the background. Contributing factors are that family life now takes place in and around the community house, and that has changed the nature of domesticity and [the] daily routine which characterised the traditional family

camp. And of course, children enjoy television, DVDs and computer games, although listening to grandmother telling a story is still a special treat in some families. But today, just like in 'olden time', family life and the setting of home are dominant themes. The round shape of the traditional wet weather shelter, wiltja, is now a rectangle. Yet contemporary milpatjunanyi still shows the influence of the sweeping movement of clearing the ground: the shape is distorted with two curving parallel lines of unequal length that are connected by outward pointing straight lines. A floor plan of a particular house sets the scene and an event is re-enacted in greatest detail showing furniture, people, movement, and repeating what has been said, who was sitting where, in which direction, etc.

Sand stories are a great tool for sharing news and up-dating one another about school excursions, shopping trips, play sessions in the saltbush scrub, or fights. Boys, who rarely play milpatjunanyi, are active listeners and witnesses to the accounts, and it is a very cheerful sight to see groups of children sitting together and talking story.

Milpatjunanyi allows children and especially the story teller, to re-live positive experiences and anticipation. It is also employed to deal with difficult issues by working them through on a symbolic level. And often, it is the first thing a girl would do in the morning in order to clear her mind before joining her peers for play, just as boys, upon waking up sometimes sit quietly by themselves, thinking

Ute Eickelkamp

ARC Research Fellow, School for Social & Policy Research Charles Darwin University, 2007

The Printer's Words - Basil Hall

One of the things that most excites me about making prints with artists in Aboriginal communities is that I'm occasionally given the opportunity to use my chosen medium to assist in a tangible way, in the recording of cultural traditions at a particular point in time.

When Hilary Furlong talked to me in 2002 about Pitjantjatjara women's sand stories at Ernabella and showed me some casts taken of the drawings which the story tellers make in the sand as they relate their tales, I began to think about other ways in which we might "capture" aspects of these stories in a visually interesting way.

It seemed logical to provide the story tellers with a fluid material, not unlike sand, that they could mark with their drawing fingers as they spoke. Nungalka (Tjaria) Stanley and Pantjiti McKenzie experimented with an impasto/sand mixture, which stayed wet long enough for the episode of the story to be drawn and looked quite interesting as a printing matrix.

However, the first impressions. (prints) weren't very successful and I reported later to Hilary that perhaps we needed another approach: "We are working with selected people because of their story-telling skills, yet we are hoping to achieve exhibition quality images in a medium they have never used!" The women were finding it difficult to slip casually into storytelling mode with their drawing fingers in a gluggy paint mixture, rather than the familiar soft sand.

In 2004 we tried something different with greater success. This time the ladies sat

at a table and the story was first discussed and divided into its component episodes, as compared to sitting in a sandy creek bed and "tapping" out the story in the normal way.

The plates they were to work on were coated with white ground (an oil paint and soap mix), numbered, and laid out along the table in front of them. Hilary talked through the story that Nungalka (Tjaria) and Amanyi were going to tell, and Natasha Rowell and I attempted to keep new plates coated and in front of each artist as each episode in her story unfolded.

It was hard to stop the white ground from drying out too fast because it was very hot at Ernabella at the time. Proofs of these plates were made in Darwin that year and taken down for discussion when I next visited.

In 2005 I made two trips and worked with Amanyi and Nungalka (Tjaria). The patient artists produced another four sequences at Ernabella, using a more direct painterly approach and watched, somewhat bemused, as another pile of etching plates disappeared north to Darwin for proofing.

A chance to meet the women in Alice Springs came later the same year and this, our most recent attempt to record further stories, was done with the assistance of anthropologist Ute Eickelkamp.

Rod Moss kindly made available the print making studios at CDU and so we had the luxury of large tables on which to work and make "story boards" with Ute's invaluable help.

The Printer's Words - *contunued*

Nura Rupert came in with Nungalka {Tjaria} and produced a wonderful hard ground set of ngintaka tjukurpa {goanna story} etchings, scratching the lines through a thin wax coating on the plates.

Nungalka {Tjaria} was asked if she would like to attempt her next series using a tjanting {with which she was intimately acquainted from her years of batik practice} to apply wax to a set of linoleum blocks. The wax acts as a resist, as it does when dyeing batiked fabric, so when the lino is etched in caustic soda, the lines remain raised while the negative/background areas are eaten away and end up lower. The results of our {collective} on going research are exhibited here.

I would like to thank Nungalka {Tjaria}, Pantjiti, Amanyi, and Nura for their patience while we tried to work out what would work best for them.

Thanks also to Hilary Furlong, Beth Sometimes, Ute Eickelkamp and my fellow printers Natasha, Jo, Merran and Michael, for their respective parts in explaining, listening to, translating, recording, and enjoying the extraordinary skills of these wonderful story tellers of Ernabella.

Basil Hall - collaborative printer

Director, Northern Editions, Charles Darwin University, 2007