A Private Brisbane Collection of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art

ROVER THOMAS (JULAMA) (c1926-1998)
Kukatja/Wangkajunga language group
Dingo Holes at Billiluna (also known as Nauma Dingo Holes) 1995
natural earth pigments on canvas
90.0 x 140.0 cm
brays artist’s name and inscription verso: S658/ 140 x 90 cm
ROVER THOMAS/ WARINGARRI ABORIGINAL ARTS/ APO 513
accompanied by framed photographs of the artist creating the work
Provenance:
Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, Western Australia (stock no. APO 513)
Private collection, Brisbane
Exhibited:
Art from the East Kimberleys, Savode Gallery, Brisbane, 9 June - 1 July 1995
Reference:
‘Vigorous Works Still Keep Cultural Identity,’ Courier-Mail, Brisbane, 9 June 1995 (illus.)
$40,000 - $60,000

Rover Thomas Joolama (Julama) was born at Yalda Soak in the Great Sandy Desert near Kunawarra (Gunawaggi or Wel 33) on the Canning Stock Route, which runs north/south for over 1,000 kilometres in Western Australia. Now recognised as a colonial folly, the creation and management of the stock route caused the dislocation of Indigenous peoples from fifteen different language groups from their lands abounding its length.

Following his mother’s death while still a child, Thomas was taken to be trained as a stockman in the Kimberley region at Billiluna (also Billaluna, Billuluna) cattle station in the Tanami Desert, hundreds of kilometres north, between Balgo and Halls Creek. Later in life he settled at Warmun (Turkey Creek), where he pioneered the critically acclaimed East Kimberley painting movement (using natural ochres on ceremonial boards and then later on canvas) in the period 1979-1982.

In 1995 the artist revisited his birthplace and the Wild Dog Dreaming sites from the artist’s traditional homelands are significant within this inheritance. The dog’s importance is also linked to the origin of Thomas’ European first name: Waringarri Arts has documented that when Thomas first came to the East Kimberley as a young man, his fondness for talking about his Dingo/Wild Dog Dreaming led to the local Kija people nicknaming him ‘Rover.’

Thomas’ approach has been described by National Gallery of Victoria curator Judith Ryan as being ‘the cosmic with the concrete.’ In various renditions of the Wild Dog/Dingo Dreaming, Thomas paints the Dreaming place of the Mother Wild Dog linked to its baubles or ‘puppy dogs’ by subterranean passages (not depicted). Also sometimes depicted are rockholes atop ridges, represented by small circles, which were vital sources of water, as well as important places in associated Dreamings.

Thomas received recognition of his importance and status amongst the country’s premier contemporary artists with selection as Australia’s representative to the 44th Venice Biennale (along with Trevor Nickolls) in 1990, the first Indigenous artists to be so honoured. This was followed shortly thereafter by winning the acquisitive McCaughey Prize (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney). Since then, two major public gallery solo exhibitions have been dedicated to the artist: Roads Cross, The Paintings of Rover Thomas, in 1994, and the posthumous I want to Paint in 2003/2004.

Footnotes
1 Art from the East Kimberley, Savode Gallery, Brisbane, 9 June 1 July 1995, organized by Waringarri Aboriginal Arts. 84. The artist portrayed in front of the present work in the memoirs by Sue Smith, ‘Vigorous Works Still Keep Cultural Identity,’ Courier-Mail, Brisbane, 9 June 1995.
2 In 1990 the artist bestowed his nickname on the Wild Dog Dreaming sites for the first time in 40 years and created a body of work around the top. This story is recounted on paperwork accompanying ‘Wurritji Country’, a print that refers to the concrete.
3 Playwright Louis Nowra has written: ‘his use of blackness takes on an iconic power... rarely has black been used so powerfully ... throughout his career Thomas’ use of black is so singular, so flamboyant...,’ in ‘Blackness in the art of Rover Thomas,’ Art and Australia, Vol.35, No.1, 1997, p.99

Suggestions
1. Rover and Queenie, National Gallery of Victoria 22 May-8 August 2000
3. The Paintings of Rover Thomas (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), 1994
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