In 1988, Ginger Riley exhibited along with fellow Ngukurr artists in the community’s first commercial show, starting visitors with their striking bold compositions and brilliant colour. At the opening, Riley was asked by a journalist why his sea eagle was green and not white. ‘It looks better’ he replied, ‘more powerful.’

This simple response illustrates Riley’s artistic authority from the get-go, and gives insight to his unique vision and talent. Decades before Sally Gabori finally swept away old notions of what Aboriginal art could and should look like, Riley, the ‘boss of colour’, was re-shaping this dialogue in a climate when barks – the familiar output from his Arnhem Land country – and Papunya Tula paintings, were widely believed to reflect the norm in Aboriginal art production.

The present work was acquired by the current owner in 1990, the year Riley began experimenting with acrylics on paper, after the present work was acquired by the current owner in 1990,

in Aboriginal art production.

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Riley was stirred after seeing Namatjira painting ‘his colour country’ in a chance meeting with Albert Namatjira in the 1950s, during Riley’s time working as a stockman. Judith Ryan records that Riley preferred to paint in sunlight, to country, or announcement of important men’s ceremonies. Ryan documents that Riley preferred to paint in sunlight, which brought extra vividness to his compositions. This work exemplifies the result: a magnificent and striking early “encounter, like a flash” with his unique palette and conceptualisation of country.

Footnotes
5. Ryan, Artlink, ibid., p. 31
7. For another with a similar multiple viewpoint, see Ryan, Ginger Riley, ibid., plate 31, p. 76
8. Ryan, Ginger Riley, ibid., p. 30. A yellow sky and heavy clouds featured in the painting selected for the cover of the catalogue for this important exhibition
9. ibid., p. 36
10. Jane Raffan