

[Intro text panel]

We Were Lost in Our Country

This exhibition takes its inspiration and title from the video *We Were Lost in Our Country* (2019) by Tuan Andrew Nguyen (b. 1976)—a recent addition to the Museum’s Robert S. and Dorothy J. Keyser Art of the Greater West Collection. Nguyen’s powerful moving image work tells the remarkable story of the *Ngurrara Canvas II* (1997), which was composed by a group of forty men and four women from the Walmajarri, Wangkatjunga, Mangala, and Juwaliny communities and language groups in Australia. The individuals convened at Lake Pirnini in the Kimberley region of the Great Sandy Desert to discuss filing a Native Title claim with the Australian government. In order to do this, the community members and Elders made a consequential decision: they would create a monumental painting to prove that they were the original inhabitants and owners of the land. Thus, painting became the vehicle to achieve political autonomy.

To the Ngurrara people, the painting is a map, made from memory, of a place where their ancestors lived for over sixty thousand years. It represents their direct connection to the land and the knowledge passed down from countless generations about their *Ngurra* (Country). Each participant painted a section—much like the works on view here—usually anchored by a significant Jila (place of living water), for which the Ngurrara were the custodians of ancient ancestral wisdom pertaining to that site. Their government claim was successful, making their story a model for the understanding of land rights, culture, and identity. In the words of Nguyen, “*We Were Lost in Our Country* explores questions of personal agency, inherited trauma, and intergenerational transmission, through a conversation among ancestors and descendants.” Importantly, he conveys the story through his interviews with Indigenous Australians, so that they chronicle their own history and relationship to the land and environment.

The video is paired with a selection of paintings by First Nations artists from the Western Desert, including Balgo, Fitzroy Crossing, Glenroy Station, Kununurra, Warakurna, and Warmun. Four of the artists from Fitzroy Crossing were involved in creating the *Ngurrara Canvas II*: Jimmy Pike, Ngiripirr Spider Snell, Mawukura Jimmy Nerrimah, and Tommy May Ngarralja. A majority of the works on display are recent gifts from Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi and are now also part of the Museum’s Robert S. and Dorothy J. Keyser Art of the Greater West Collection.

In 2012 the Museum defined the Greater West as a “super region,” which broadens conventional definitions of the area by expanding the scope of the collection’s geographic emphasis to encompass the space generally bounded by Alaska to Patagonia and Australia to the U.S. Intermountain West. This is a geography of frontiers characterized by large expanses of open land, enormous natural resources, diverse Indigenous peoples, and colonization—and the conflicts that inevitably arise when all four of these factors exist in the same place at the same time.

All works in the exhibition are from the Robert S. and Dorothy J. Keyser Art of the Greater West Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, unless otherwise noted.

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[section text with Land Acknowledgement- should go adjacent to the intro text]

Land Acknowledgement

The Nevada Museum of Art acknowledges the traditional homelands of the Wa She Shu (Washoe), Numu (Northern Paiute), Newe (Western Shoshone), and Nuwu (Southern Paiute) people of the Great Basin. This includes the 28 tribal nations that exist as sovereign nations and continue as stewards of this land. We appreciate the opportunity to live and learn on these Indigenous homelands.

Indigenous Peoples Warning

We acknowledge and respect that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

Sacred objects are those of Indigenous material culture that are deemed holy or sacrosanct by virtue of their ritual or ceremonial associations. We recognize and respect that not all Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and beliefs can be shared for consumption by outsiders.

Indigenous visitors are respectfully advised that the following exhibition contains the names and artworks of deceased individuals.

[section text panel]

Balgo

The paintings displayed along this wall and in the next gallery are by artists from the Balgo desert community (also known as Wirrimanu), located in the Balwinna Aboriginal Reserve in the Great Sandy Desert of Australia. One of the most remote of the nation's desert settlements, it is inhabited by people of eight language groups—Kukatja, Walmajarri, Warlpiri, Pintupi, Djaru, Ngardi, Wangkatjunga, and Manyjiljarra—each with its own history and stories. The Country (homeland) is marked with sand dunes covered in spinifex (a grassy plant), orange-red rocks, and the limitless plains of the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts. A strong easterly wind characterizes the Balgo region, whose name is thought to derive from the Kukatja word Palgu (dirty wind).

Like most areas of Australia, the Balgo community's history was upended by settler colonialism. Balgo was established as a mission by priests of the German Catholic Pallottine order in 1939. Many Indigenous Australians, a nomadic people, had never seen Katiya (white people) before walking into the mission from the desert to seek food and shelter as a result of the violent dislocation from their homeland and decimation of their people. Much later, the Balgo community's formation as an art and cultural center was largely inspired by the example set by Papunya Tula (near Alice Springs) and Pintupi relatives who traveled from the Central Desert area in 1972.

Many artists of this region are affiliated with the Warlayirti Arts Centre, founded in 1987 (now Warlayirti Artists), which is owned and governed by Aboriginal Australians. Vibrant color, specifically bold yellows, oranges, and reds, distinguish their paintings, which uniquely relate to diverse Tjukurpa (Dreaming) stories (ancient Australian creation knowledge). The palette is linked to the bright colors of the land, with orange referring to the sand of the desert and red often symbolizing fire. Balgo artists in the exhibition include Susie Bootja Bootja^ك Napaltjarri, Imelda (Yukenbarri) Gugaman, Mati (Bridget) Mudjidell, Eubena Nampitjin, Rosie Nanyuma, Lucy Yukenbarri Napanangka, Bai Bai Napangardi, Nora Wompi Nungurrayi, Elizabeth Nyumi^ك Nungurrayi, Miriam Olodoodi, Michael Muji Tjangala, Kamara Brandy Tjungurrayi, and Christine Yukenbarri.

[section text panel]

Fitzroy Crossing

The artists Jarinyanu David Downs, Mawukura Jimmy Nerrimah, Tommy May Ngarralja, Jimmy Pike, and Ngiripirr Spider Snell are all affiliated with the Mangkaja Art Centre at Fitzroy Crossing, which is centrally located in the Kimberley region of the Great Sandy Desert. Fitzroy Crossing artists are generally from five language groups: Walmajarri, Wangkatjunga, Bunuba, Gooniyandi, and Nyigina. The painting movement at Fitzroy Crossing began in 1982, when the Karrayili Adult Education Centre was created; the Mangkaja Art Centre developed as an offshoot and was later incorporated in 1993 (Mangkaja means “wet weather spinifex shelter” in Walmajarri).

All the artists whose work hangs on this wall (except Jarinyanu David Downs) were involved with making the *Ngurrara Canvas II* in 1997 and subsequently participated in the Native Title claim hearing. After making a first canvas in 1996 (which is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia), they decided it did not accurately reflect their Country (homeland), so the second canvas was made that was used as evidence in the court hearings to prove that they had a continuing connection to their land. When a group applies to a tribunal for a Native Title claim, they make a declaration that they “hold the rights and interests in an area of land and/or water according to their traditional laws and customs.” After ten years of waiting and circulating the painting around Australia to gain support for their claim, the case was finally decided in their favor. The second canvas remains with the community at Fitzroy Crossing as a vital living document of their history and culture. Murungkurr Terry Murray, one of the artists from Fitzroy Crossing who appears in *We Were Lost in Our Country*, explains: “Our culture is an everyday learning thing. I grew up with this. You have to have a strong mind and strong spirit and soul and always listen to your Elders.”