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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



EXPERIENCE STORIES OF IDENTITY, CREATION AND CULTURE FROM AUSTRALIA'S WESTERN DESERT REGION

The US premiere of *We Were Lost in Our Country* pairs a video by Vietnamese contemporary artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen with thirty paintings by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the vast Western Desert region.

RENO, NV (May 16, 2024) – How was it that a painting came to be used to establish Native Title over 32,300 square miles of Australia's Great Sandy Desert? It's a question at the narrative heart of Tuan Andrew Nguyen's video *We Were Lost in Our Country*—a moving image artwork that forms the curatorial springboard for the Nevada Museum of Art exhibition of the same name, curated by senior curator of contemporary art Apsara DiQuinzio.

Nguyen's powerful 2019 video documents the making of the *Ngurrara Canvas II* (1997), a spectacular painting, measuring approximately 26 x 32 ft. Painted by a group of 40 men and four women from the Walmajarri, Wangkatjunga, Mangala and Juwaliny communities and language groups, it is a map of Country and ancestral land, used in the court hearing before the Australian Native Title Tribunal as proof of their land claim.

The exhibition itself pairs Nguyen's 32-minute video, in its US premiere, with a selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander paintings from the Museum's permanent collection. Artists featured in the exhibition are from the Great Sandy Desert, within the Western Desert region of Australia, with some involved in the painting of *Ngurrara Canvas II*, which took place at the Pirnini outstation in the Great Sandy Desert's Kimberley region in 1997. The court hearing also took place at Pirnini, at the insistence of the artists, who argued it should happen on their land.

Interestingly, the first *Ngurrara Canvas* was painted in 1996, but the artists decided it didn't accurately reflect their relationships to Country, so the second one was created and used in the court hearing. Its importance can't be underestimated as it signifies one of the few times a painting has been used to prove historical land tenure in Australia's history. In 2007—ten years after the Pirnini hearing took place—the Federal Court of Australia ruled in favor of the communities; not only was their claim successful, but it also determined that Native Title already exists.

Nguyen's video is a poignant exploration of identity, culture, inherited trauma and the complex mechanisms and traces of memory. It was originally commissioned by Adrian Lahoud, the curator of the 2019 Sharjah Architecture Triennial, and is now in the permanent collection of the Nevada Museum of Art. Importantly, it represents another opportunity for the artists to tell their own stories, conveying thousands of years of knowledge to dynamically depict something common to all four communities and language groups involved—waterholes (Jila). The video also illuminates the entanglements involved in postcolonial displacement, highlighting how First Nations people in Australia have had to problematically prove their right to maintain land they have cared for and protected for over 65,000 years.

Exhibiting 30 artworks from the Western Desert of Australia, now in the Robert S. and Dorothy J. Keyser Art of the Greater West Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, alongside this video further brings to life many of the narratives and themes deeply embedded in paintings from the Great Sandy Desert region.

As the exhibition's curator, DiQuinzio says, "I am honored to have the opportunity to assemble the works of Western Desert artists from Australia, and pair them with Tuan Andrew Nguyen's powerful meditation on the making of *Ngurrara Canvas II*, twenty years after the painting was made. As someone who has experienced being dislocated from his own country of Vietnam as a refugee after the Vietnam War, he brings a thoughtful and sensitive approach to conveying first-hand accounts of the Indigenous Australians featured in the video."

Artists including Ngarralja Tommy May, Nyilpirr Spider Snell and Jimmy Pike were involved in painting the canvas at Pirnini, with celebrated Great Sandy Desert artist Pike laying down the first marking on *Ngurrara Canvas II*—a line that represents the Canning Stock Route—after which all 39 artists followed. Other artists in the exhibition are from Balgo Hills, southeast of Fitzroy Crossing (a town south of the Pirnini outstation), and a couple of artists, namely Beerbee Mungnari and Queenie McKenzie, originate from near Warmun, just northeast of Fitzroy Crossing.

The exhibition *We Were All Lost in Our Country* is, of course, only possible due to the extraordinary recent gift of 72 works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art from Seattle-based art collectors Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan. This sees the Nevada Museum of Art join the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Seattle Art Museum as stewards of Levi and Kaplan's esteemed collection.

Image captions: Eubena Nampitjin. Near Jupiter Well, 1995. Acrylic on linen, 70 15/16 x 47 1/4 in. (180 x 120 cm), Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, Gift of Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi. © Eubena Nampitjin / Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2023. Photo: Zocalo Studios; Christine Yukenbarri. Winpurpula, 2005. Acrylic on linen, 47 1/4 x 31 1/2 in. (120x 80 cm), Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, Gift of Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi. © Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2023. Photo: Zocalo Studios; Rosie Nanyumi. Kumbuljiri, near Mangkai in Great Sandy Desert, 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 35 7/16 x 23 9/16 in. (90 X 60 cm), Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, Gift of Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi. © Copyright Agency. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2024. Photo: Zocalo Studios

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The **Nevada Museum of Art** is the only art museum in Nevada accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). A private, nonprofit organization founded in 1931, the statewide institution is supported by its membership as well as sponsorships, gifts and grants. Through its permanent collections, original exhibitions and programming, and E.L. Cord Museum School, the Nevada Museum of Art provides meaningful opportunities for people to engage with a range of art and education experiences. The Museum's Center for Art + Environment is an internationally recognized research center dedicated to supporting the practice, study, and awareness of creative interactions between people and their environments. The Center houses unique archive materials from more than 1,500 artists working on all seven continents, including Cape Farewell, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Lita Albuquerque, Burning Man, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Great Basin Native Artists Archive, Ugo Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains*, and Trevor Paglen's *Orbital Reflector*.

In 2022, the Museum announced plans to expand its facilities by 50,000 square feet, with the goal of enhancing its education, gallery, and research spaces. The expansion is designed by Will Bruder, the architect who designed the Museum's current structure, and not only increases gallery space for the Museum's permanent collections, but also provides enhanced access to its vast art, archive, and library collections through a renovated and expanded Center for Art + Environment. The expansion is scheduled for completion in early 2025.

Learn more at nevadaart.org.

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.