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LAURAINNE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



ROVER THOMAS c.1926 - 1998

Region: East Kimberley, W.A.
Community: Warmun (Turkey Creek)
Language: Kukatja / Wangajungka

Jabanunga (Rainbow Serpent) 1996
ochre and binder on canvas
180 x 270 cm

Provenance:

Warmun Traditional Artists, W.A.
private collection, W.A.

When Cyclone Tracy cataclysmically laid waste to Darwin on Christmas Day in 1974, many Aboriginal people saw it as a sign that their culture and traditions needed strengthening. A powerful dream, involving the spirit of Rover's dead aunt, inspired him to create a song and dance cycle that evolved into the Krill Krill (Gurrir Gurrir) ceremony. The spirit described the details of a journey that she had undertaken after her death, in the company of other spirit beings. In Rover's re-visitation of that dream he too saw the places and the characters involved in the saga. At the end of the song cycle the traveling spirit looks from Wyndham, across the waters to the northeast, and witnesses the Rainbow Serpent's vengeful destruction of the Territory capital.

The ceremonial re-enactment of the Krill Krill dream took place for the first time in 1977 and was repeated at a number of locations in the East Kimberley region, in Arnhem Land, and further afield through the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the ceremony, painted boards depicting the important sites and spirit beings, were carried on the shoulders of the participants. The boards used in the early ceremonies were created by Rover's uncle, and mentor, Paddy Jaminji, who was assisted by Jacko Dolmyn, Paddy Mosquito, Rover, and others.

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Jabanunga depicts the Rainbow Serpent penetrating the earth. The concentric circles represent both his eyes and vital organs and specific sites in the Pilbara where the Rainbow Serpent entered the ground on his subterranean journey to the sea following the destruction of Darwin on Christmas Day, 1974.

Representing the 'big rain', Jabanunga, the dreamtime Rainbow Serpent, is depicted attempting to infiltrate the Ophthalmia Ranges, west of Mount Newman, to fulfil his destiny and return to the sea from whence he came. In a radical departure, Rover depicts his disembodied entrails, and vital organs.

Despite it being one of his favourite dance stories, this large-scale work is believed to be Rover's first attempt at picturing the final chapter of the story, apart from perhaps some small early corroboree boards.

Most stories relate the fact that in the beginning the land was flat and treeless and that the Serpent created everything. Some tell of the two boys that were swallowed by him, and were released in the form of two Rainbow Lorikeets, that escaped from his entrails after cutting his belly. In some versions the Rainbow Serpent is depicted with what looks like two horns. A close inspection of this image reveals the trail of the horns manifested as mountain ranges etched into the landscape. (The ragged Ophthalmia Ranges stretch 20 kilometres from Newman for a hundred and fifty kilometres in a north westerly direction, before flattening to disappear into the vast plains of the Pilbara.)

Adjacent to the ranges are many of today's mining tenements, including the Hancock Ranges and Gina Rinehart's huge Hope Downs mine. This is country that Rover Thomas's family and related clan groups, walked on foot for eons, as they travelled between available water and food sources.

The Serpent is thought to have risen in Lake Waukarlykarly, north of Newman, or Lake Dora. This is the country where Rover spent his youth, where Punmu, is located. The Serpent entered the Fortescue River near Ophthalmia, as it passed through Newman, and later travelled on to the ocean. The Fortescue Mining Group (FMG) has ongoing concerns adjacent to, and derived its name from, this major Pilbara River.

Although Rover occasionally included figurative elements and topographical profiles in his paintings, his work is more familiarly characterised by an aerial perspective. His most contemplative and sombre works draw the viewer into spacious planes of painterly applied and textured ochre. White or black dots serve only to create emphasis or to draw the eye along pathways of time and movement, following the forms of the land in which important events are encoded. In many of his works the predominant use of black conveys a startling, strangely emotional, intensity. Warm and earthy ochres, and a palpable sense of spirituality, invite the viewer on the one hand, to consider the unfolding of important events, while at the same time, purposefully sustain us in an ancient and timeless landscape. By the time this painting was produced, Thomas had perfected his approach to capturing a particular distinctive feature set against the vastness and openness of the surrounding topography.

From his first entrance into painting in the early 1980s, Thomas injected a timeless sense of movement and fluidity of the land. Frequently, as in this work, he combined direct contemporary reportage with the older Dreamtime transformational significance of the landscape.

Adrian Newstead with contributions from Maxine Taylor and Terry Brookes plus excerpts from Mike O'Ferrall 2002.