

Drawn by Aboriginal art

Stephen Scourfield

takes off on an East Kimberley art trek

Kevin Kelly is making coffee in the kitchen at Red Rock Art, Kununurra, and above him is a row of old hats. Holey crowns, gnawed edges, spattered with something that might be diesel or blood.

Two of them belonged to Rover Thomas.

Rover and Kevin were good mates — so much so that Kevin remains an executor for the artist and Aboriginal senior who died in 1998. So much so that he even gave him his old bush hats.

Kevin was good friends with Queenie McKenzie, too. She died the same year.

Kevin was there, at the start of the Balgo art movement in 1985, helping to set up the art centre there, and the Warmun art centre in the Tanami Desert as that burst on the scene, too.

He recalls Balgo's first exhibition, Art of the Great Sandy Desert in 1986. The painters formed the co-operative Warlayirti Artists the following year. They were times that helped to open the world's eyes to contemporary Aboriginal culture and helped lay the foundation for the current international interest in Australian indigenous culture.

Today, around the walls of Red Rock Art, it's Jock Mosquito's ochre paintings and Ruby Packsaddle following on.

"Before these people were painting for sale, their paintings were ceremonial objects," Kevin said.

He understands that Aboriginal art functions on many levels. Today he

will share that with us, on the ground and in the air.

Pilot James Margin fires up Slingair's Cessna 210 Centurion and holds the window up so its prop forces air into the cockpit. Kevin Kelly is beside him, doing the same. A fan-assisted oven.

Then we are up, peeling away from the Sleeping Buddha rock formation that so dominates Kununurra and leaving the patchwork of the Ord Irrigation Area behind.

Then the Durack Homestead, Lake Argyle, which James says covers 37,000sqkm when full, the Carr Boyd Ranges and Argyle Diamond Mine. Texas Downs Station and the 350-million-year-old Bungle Bungle, with valleys that Aboriginal people have used for 20,000 years.

In James' steady hands and with Kevin as our guide for the day, we are heading south to Balgo, set in the redness about 200km south of Halls Creek, then Halls Creek and Warmun.

Critic Robert Hughes has called Aboriginal art "the world's last great art movement". Today, beginning at Red Rock Art, flying over the landscape and now approaching Balgo, we are following its trail and stories on Slingair's East Kimberley Indigenous Art and Culture Tour.

Helicopter Tjungurrayi is heading for the dunny but stops to chat anyway.

It's payday for the Warlayirti Artists of the Wirrimanu Community

at Balgo Hills; the place is buzzing and everyone's in a bustling good mood.

The place is turning over \$2 million in artworks annually, with 300 artists on the books, including eight prolific ones who attract significant prices for their work.

"We want to bring up the lower end," says art co-ordinator Annette Cock, still quite newly here from Melbourne.

They believe Christine Yukenbarri — 27 and Helicopter's daughter — is their fastest upcoming artist. "Her work is amazing," Annette says. "It sells purely on artistic merit."

Christine started painting in 1999 and Annette adds: "She's a really spiritual person. When they are on their country, it is quite amazing to be with them."

The youngest artist whose painting is for sale is 13 years old.

Artists get 60 per cent of the sale price, and their materials, and 40 per cent goes towards running the co-operative.

Tjumbo Tjapanangka shows me his work and some snaps of a trip to Melbourne. MCG, he grins. Then he tells me he's trying to get enough money for a Toyota.

All around, the senses are deluged with colour and the vibration of stories being told.

Kevin Kelly and Queenie McKenzie set up the first Warmun arts centre in the old post office. Today it's spread between an old house and a shed and pretty soon it will be in a new centre,

designed by Steve Irvine of Monsoon Architects, Kununurra.

The Federal and State governments have chipped in \$400,000 each and the Gija artists have saved \$500,000 over four years out of those 40 per cents.

They are turning over \$1 million a year, perhaps selling 15 or 16 paintings a day in the dry season, predominantly to Germans, French and middle-class Australians.

The new gallery will be 18m by 18m with big verandas for some of the centre's 63 painters to work on.

"Up to 15 artists work in the mornings," says Megan Buckley. She and partner Eamonn Scott have been art co-ordinators here for three years. "People get to sit down with the Aboriginal painters and talk to them."

There are several up-and-coming painters and a real feeling of community.

"In some communities there is a feeling that the elders own the art — but here the young people are encouraged. About 40 of the painters are under 35 and the youngest person painting to sell is 11. There is a big number aged around 25 or 26."

Kevin adds: "I think that is unique to this art centre".

It has played an important role in raising self-esteem. "There is extremely limited ability here to make a buck," Megan says. "But some of these young artists are making \$250 or \$300 a week.

"The senior artists see it as intrinsic to the young ones because it is teaching them culture. There is no cringe here

about painting — it is something they take extreme pride in."

Natural ochres sit in buckets. Yellow, black, red, brown, various beiges and creams. It is collected by the artists from a 300km radius. Ironwood gum is crushed and used as a shellac-style lacquer. "People all paint their own country, which they inherit from the old people," says Marika Patrick, chairwoman of the arts centre and a painter.

"It's never just shapes for the sake of shapes," emphasises Megan.

Farther in, the Moon Dreaming of Mabel Juli stops me dead. This is the story she paints most — a moon and a star (see story above). The moon wanted to marry the star but it was of a different skin group.

In her mid-70s, she paints like an angel, standing and swaying.

Slingair chief executive Sonja Mitchell joins us at Red Rock Art, Kununurra, for a glass of wine to round up what has been a big day. A very big day.

She has been an enthusiastic and vital supporter of getting the art tour flight together and says she is keen to help indigenous projects that are sustainable in the long term.

The companionable talk seems to fade as I let my eyes scan back around the gallery. It seems a long time since Kevin was making coffee here this morning.

The pictures seem to vibrate with meaning. Perhaps I am just tired. Or perhaps we have really travelled a long way today, in many senses.

Slingair's East Kimberley Indigenous Art and Culture Tour is on Tuesday and Thursday from May to September, leaving Kununurra at 7am (or guests can be picked up at El Questro Wilderness Park). It is \$1490 each (where there are two on board), \$990 (three) and \$760 (four). See www.slingair.com.au or call 1800 095 500.

Red Rock Art, Kununurra is in Acacia House, Coolibah Drive, Kununurra. Call 9169 3000.

For Balgo art centre and Warlayirti Artists, see www.balgoart.org.au or call 9168 8152.

Warmun art centre is open 9am to 4pm during the week. See www.warmunart.com or call 9168 7496.



Marika Patrick, artist and chairwoman of Warmun arts centre.



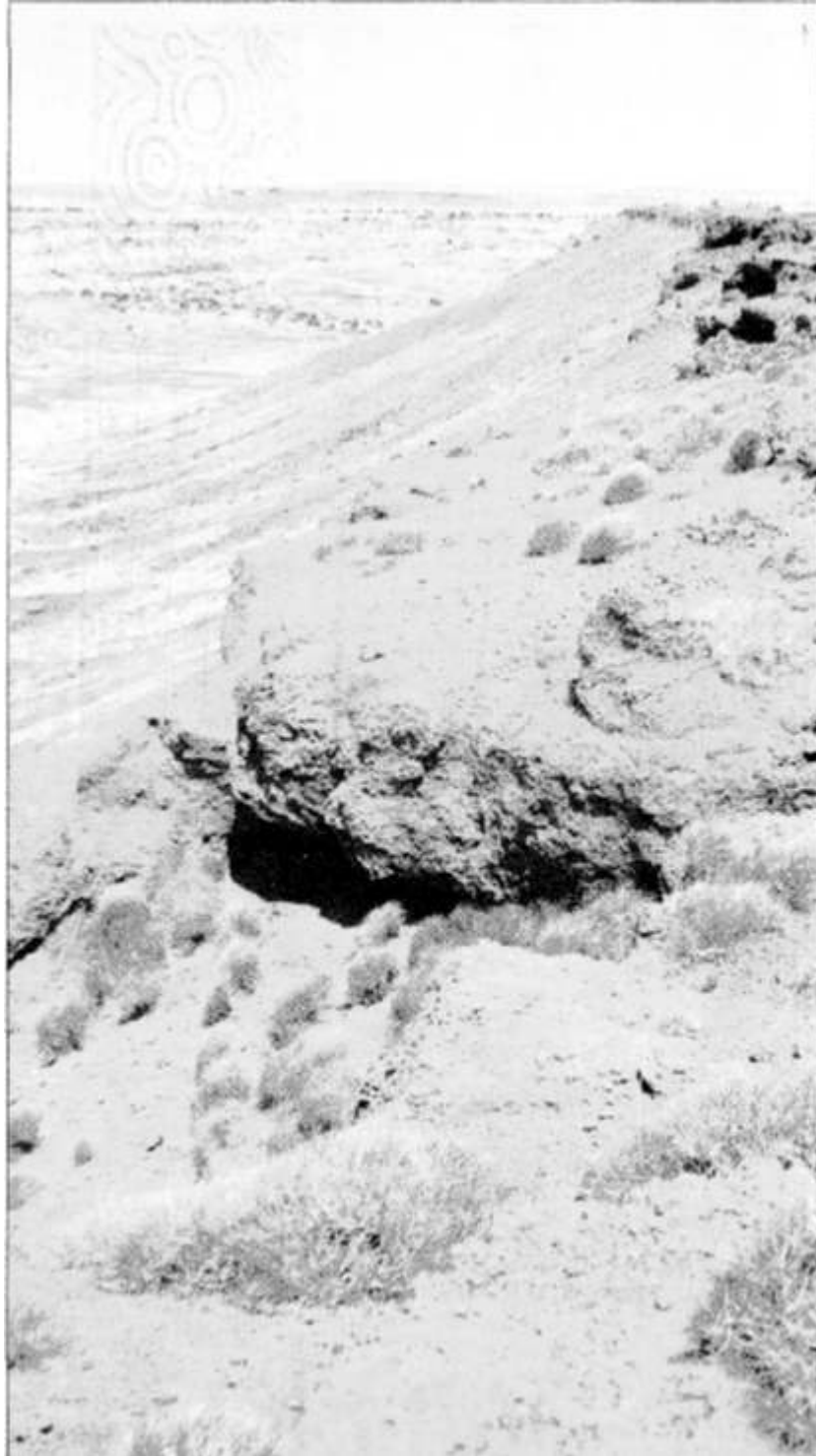
Warmun art co-ordinator Megan Buckley with Kevin Kelly in the centre's artwork store.



Warmun art and its guard dogs.



Warmun artists use natural ochres, which they collect over a 300km radius.



The Pound breakaway at Balgo, in the Tanami Desert.



Ningie Nangala works at the art centre in Balgo. It has been a leader in the contemporary Aboriginal art movement. Pictures: Stephen Scourfield