



NYAPARU (WILLIAM) GARDINER: *Outside Men*

Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne
19 May - 19 June 2017

I met William Gardiner at the Darwin Art Fair in 2016. He and fellow artist Winnie Sampi were sitting at the back of the Spinifex Hill Artists booth, a long way from their homes in Port Hedland. Centre manager Greg Taylor introduced us and I remember thinking William had that wiry build and gentleness typical of stockmen. Greg mentioned William was part of the Strelley mob. My ears pricked as I knew about the Strelley mob, a loose grouping of Pilbara Western Desert Aboriginal people which came together after the strikes of 1946-48 led to over 850 unpaid Aboriginal pastoral workers walking off 25 properties, demanding a weekly wage. They incorporated as the Nomads group and appointed white activist Don McLeod as their nominated representative. Later they bought their own pastoral properties – first Strelley and later six others – and worked with Don McLeod yandying tin and doing other work to eke out a living.

I heard this story in 1985, while making an archival film on artist Sam Fullbrook. Sam had heard about McLeod and the mob in the early 1950s through trade union contacts, and spent a year working his way from Sydney to join them at Pilgangoora. He helped with their projects and when McLeod was overseas raising money, he managed their legal affairs. He also set up a studio in the spinifex, where he painted his second exhibition, depicting the mob going about their everyday lives. These works and his portraits of Don McLeod 1954 (Art Gallery of WA) and strike leader Jacob Oberdoo (1957-60, National Gallery of Australia) constitute a remarkable and little known record of the early years at Strelley.

William's eyes lit up when I mentioned Sam. He told me that as a boy he watched Sam paint in the spinifex-thatched studio, and remembered Sam encouraging him to draw. But William did not begin painting at this time. His working life was spent as a pastoral worker and later for his people as a storyteller and language worker. Three years ago he began painting, and as the works in *Outside Men* demonstrate he is a worthy visual historian to record these events from his people's perspective.

The people he paints are men he knew as a child or young man, the displaced workers who found employment as truck-drivers or miners, labourers or station-hands. He includes texts telling us about them and their work, through which we understand the back-breaking labour and long periods they had to spend far from their families, following the work on stations from the Pilbara up into the Kimberley.

He depicts each man alone, sitting or resting or waiting, in a moment of repose. He is careful with their attire, pose and facial features, determined to capture their individuality. As he comments in one text: "I forget his name, this man, but I got his face". Many of them have passed away, and their figures are often ethereal, so light they seem to float in the landscape like spirits, or like Ned Kelly in Sidney Nolan's 1946-47 series. He shares Nolan's interest in the figure/ground relationship, and his confidence in placing a figure in a landscape.

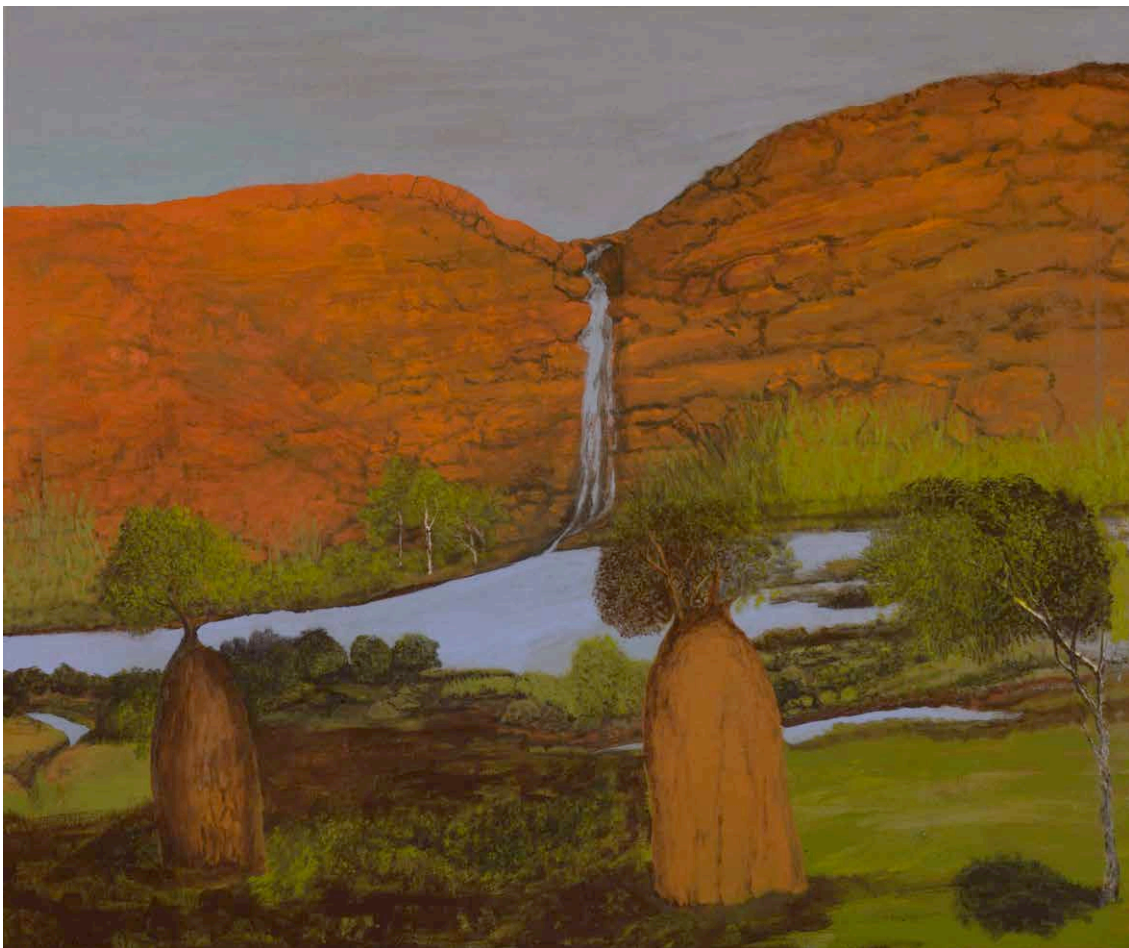
In fact Nolan comes to mind often when viewing the works – for example his 'blink' technique, in which Nolan viewed a subject with eyes closed then opened them momentarily, and painted the residual image he saw on his eyelids. William's portraits have the same vivid, snapshot quality. Like Nolan, he's a natural painter, confidently using expressive distortion, contrast and colour. Figures can be distended, limbs small, heads large, reflecting emotional rather than anatomical truth. Sometimes the landscape can be seen through the figures, rendering them insubstantial or ghostly.

In *Outside Men*, William Gardiner's painting is a conscious act of remembering and recording these old people and their experiences, their struggles to assert their independence and survive the consequences. They were people who took part in some of the most momentous events of post-war Aboriginal history, waging an epic legal battle against the Western Australian State Government to see Section 70 of the Western Australian Constitution 1889 honoured and revenue provided "for the welfare...education...preservation...and wellbeing of the Aboriginal people". This movement was a key precursor to the struggle for Aboriginal self-determination, land rights and native title. We should be thankful for the priceless legacy William is leaving his people and all Australians in these profoundly moving paintings, and the fact that he has done so with such tact and dignity, honesty and restraint.

John Cruthers
May 2017

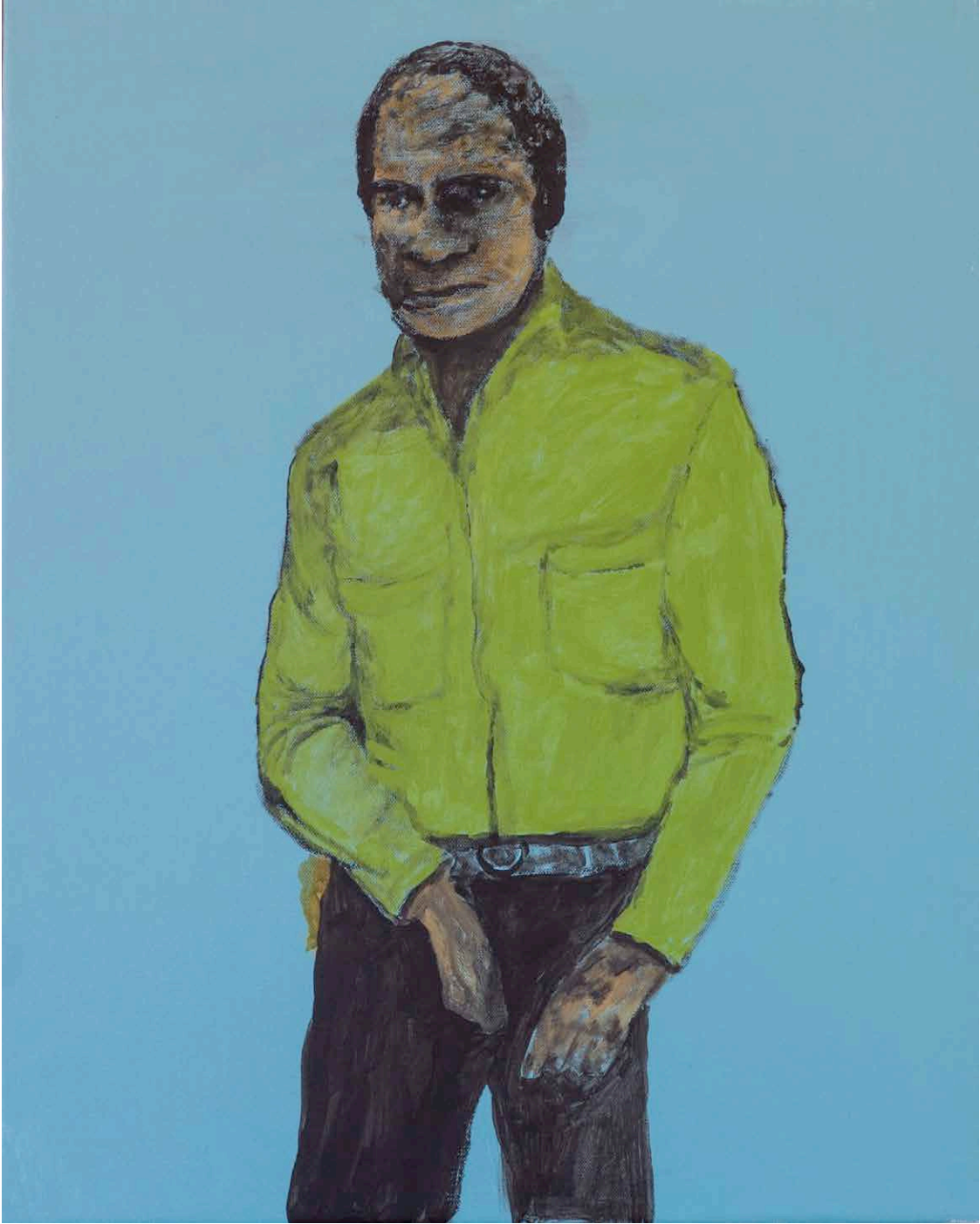
With thanks to Marnie Tonkin

Images courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne



Nyaparu (William) Gardiner
Camballin 2015
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
76 x 91 cm

We come down the Camballin river in the West Kimberley, east of Derby. When the big rain comes, in Looma area, the water runs down from the hill and fills up the river bed. It runs to Myroodah crossing and from there it goes to Derby. The boab nut trees here, mostly in the Kimberley, this is the time when they have a drink. The birds are happy too [whistles]. Old people would use the boab nut for food.



Nyaparū (William) Gardiner
My Father's Brother 2016
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
51 x 40.5 cm

I can't call his name. He's passed away now. I know him by his nose, he's got one like this [presses tip of nose and flares nostrils, laughs].



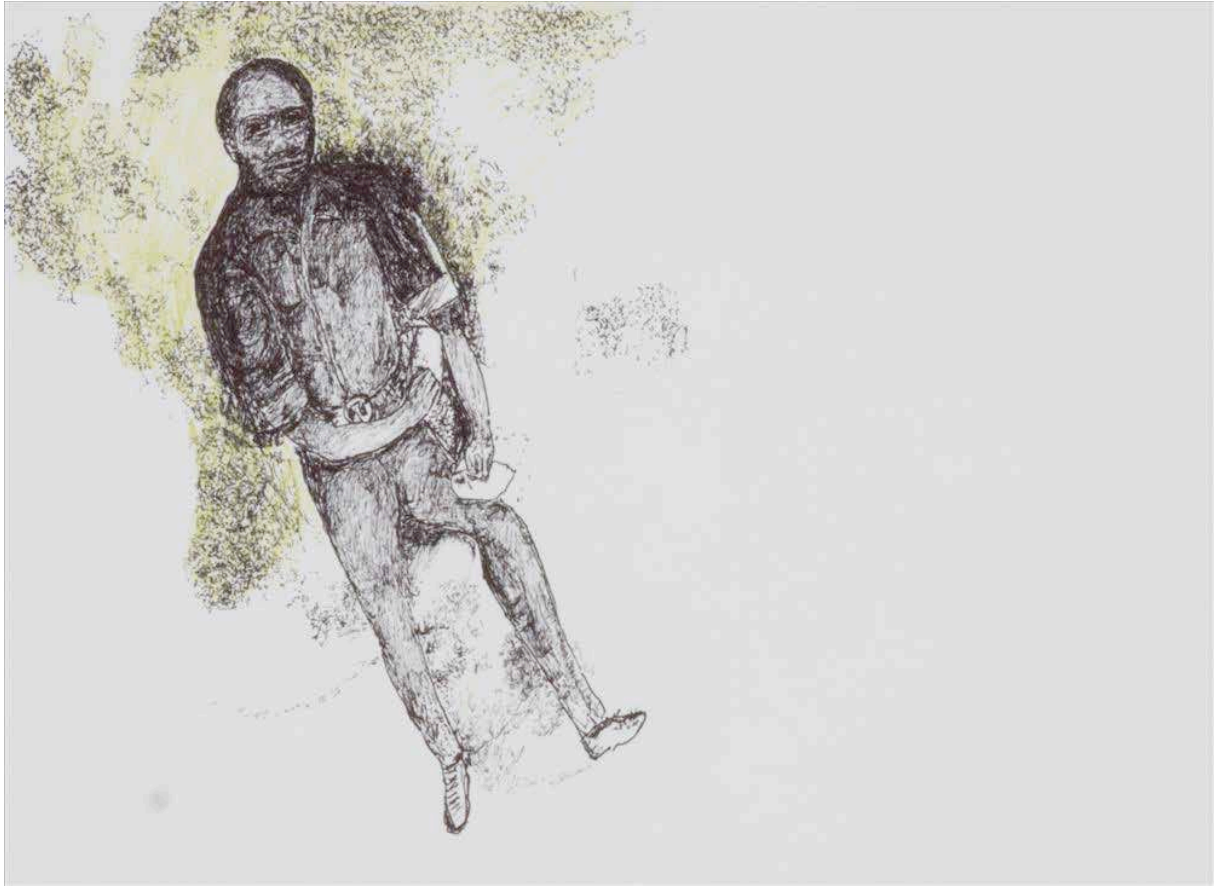
Nyaparau (William) Gardiner
Carting Tucker 2017
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
51 x 40.5 cm

"Get off the road!" he used to say. He was bringing in the flour, sugar and tea in the tucker bags. Some people would try to jump in his motorcar. I forget his name, this man, but I got his face.



Nyaparu (William) Gardiner
Showing the Drovers (II) 2017
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
91.5 x 61 cm

He's my old man, my mother's brother. He had a funny walk, walking a bit sideways. The drovers had to be shown the Country by the old people, otherwise they would perish. Some didn't listen to the blackfellas. This man here, showed them where the water was so they could take the cattle along the Canning Stock Route.



Nyaparu (William) Gardiner
Stationhand 2016
pen and pencil on paper
30 x 42 cm

He's sitting down with a bit of meat and a bread. He's been having a hard time, working at Myroodah Station.