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ICONS OF THE DESERT

On a sunny May evening, a small group of press was invited to preview "Icons of the Desert", a show of early Aboriginal paintings that will open at New York University's Grey Art Gallery on September 1st. (It is currently on view at UCLA's Fowler Museum in Los Angeles.) We gathered in an NYU room with views of Washington Square Park, nibbled cheddar cubes and learned that this will be the first American exhibition dedicated to early acrylic paintings from Papunya, a tiny community in the Northern Territory of Australia comprised of about 300 indigenous people. The Papunya painting movement began in 1971, when a Sydney school teacher at a government-established Aboriginal relief camp encouraged a group of Aboriginal men to paint. The show's 50 works are drawn mainly from the earliest years, from 1971 to 1974. Only 750 works were ever made.



The paintings themselves are transfixing and difficult to describe. They are abstract, with a natural palette of cocoa-brown, cream, rust, black and yellow. Recurring shapes tend towards the phallic or cellular, and occasionally recall bones or grids. It helps to understand the works when viewing them in a certain order, but even then they remain inscrutable.

The exhibition's handsome catalogue was scattered about the room. The paintings look good in reproduction. Oddly, several images are left out of the book with a small note explaining that they are too sacred to be included, yet these reproductions are available in a supplement tucked into the book's back cover of the book.

Fred Myers, NYU's Anthropology Department Chair, delivered a few remarks as a video displayed archival footage of artists working. The men paint with brushes or twigs, dipping into pigments stored in old food cans. The paintings "tell the ancestral stories of their country" and form an iconography, Myers explained. The abstract images are all symbolic, and often represent ceremonies and myths. "The paintings are beautiful," he observed. "And we don't understand them as well as we might."

This element of mystery makes up a large part of the show's allure. The art is uncommonly moving for two reasons: the paintings are spectacularly beautiful and each one affords a glimpse into a complex and remote belief system, otherwise off-limits to Western eyes.

"Icons of the Desert" is now on view at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, Los Angeles (until August 2nd). It will then travel to the Grey Art Gallery at New York University (September 1st to December 5th).

~ MOLLY YOUNG

Picture credit: Mystery Sand Mosaic, November 1974, Shorty Lungkarta; reproduced with permission of Papunya Tula Artists through the Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney; Photos: Tony De Camillo for the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University