

# **PAINTING THE COUNTRY**

Tracking the kingfisher songline from the western desert to Uluru with a group of internationally acclaimed artists and custodians from Balgo Hills



1 Hour HDTV Documentary

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## Synopsis

Balgo Hills or *Wirrimanu* is located on the edge of the Tanami and Great Sandy Deserts. For most of the year it's hot and dry and is one of Australia's most isolated Aboriginal communities.

Balgo has had its share of trouble. High wire fences surround the white people's accommodation and recent riots have led to a permanent police presence. Most people are on welfare, truancy is high and rusted car bodies litter the landscape.

Yet on the edges of town amidst this palette of despair lies a brand new building with a three-sided verandah. Here there is no graffiti or litter. Walking through the door is like entering a spectacular flower shop. The walls are adorned with brightly coloured paintings whose luminescence and brilliance send vibrations around the room. Sprawled on the floor are men and women dressed in shabby clothes imbued with the aroma of a thousand campfires. Some gently hum while others are deep in thought creating extraordinarily beautiful works of art.

*Warlayirti Artists* has garnered the strengths of the disparate nomadic tribes which make up this desert community and through painting is actively rekindling culture, building self esteem and achieving success on the international art stage.

But it's not an easy path. The challenge lies in how to nurture the traditional way of life amongst its' artists – many of whom grew up in the desert surviving only through memory and reverence for the traditional song cycles of their ancestors. These songs would lead them to food and water and provide them with spiritual nourishment and a moral code of behaviour. It is these Dreamtime stories of their country, totemic ancestors and creation heroes, which they now paint.

What would happen if a group of artists – many of whom have had exhibitions all over the world were for the first time taken on a journey to follow one of their most ancient sacred song cycles? The route would pass through a landscape where there are few roads, no petrol stations, no taps, and no supermarkets?

Will they need to 'sing' the country to remember where they are going or which direction to take? What memories will the journey trigger? What ceremonies will be performed to connect with their myths? What bush tucker is available and what paintings will be created as maps for the journey?

*Painting The Country* will follow 10 celebrated artists including Lucy Yukenbarri, Helicopter Tjungarrayi, Bai Bai Napangnarti and John Lee as they follow the dreaming track of the *Luurnpa* -the mythical Kingfisher from Balgo down through Lake Mackay and on to Australia's most resonant landmark - Uluru.

The film will offer audiences an intimate insight as to why country and culture is still intrinsic to these artists despite the inevitable impact of modern life.



Path of the journey – Balgo to Uluru.

## Director's Approach

I have had extensive experience making films about other cultures both in Australia and the Australasian region. During the research for this film I had the strong feeling that even though I was in Australia I might as well have been in another country. The conditions that most Aboriginal people live in – both physically and socially are so remote from the average Aussie viewer that it is a challenge to see how we can make this world relevant and intriguing.

Aboriginal art is probably the only aspect of indigenous culture that has managed to penetrate mainstream Australian (and international) consciousness. So it will be through art that we introduce our audience to the world of Aboriginal people.

My intention through ***Painting The Country*** is to not only take a group of artists on a journey but also take a white audience on a parallel journey which will manage to peel away a few layers and let them inside the Aboriginal way of life, culture, history and spirituality.

The film will focus on the story of two artists (at present we propose Lucy Yukenbarri and Helicopter), although the other artists on the trip will all feature as the need arises. Erica Izett and Tim Acker, the two white art advisers and Kim Akerman, the anthropologist will each have a role to play as cultural mediators. I am keen to portray a positive story between Aboriginals and white people who are trying to work as go betweens in the two worlds. This is essential if there is ever to be any reconciliation between the two cultures.

Stylistically ***Painting the Country*** will be a mix of energetic observational footage mixed with interviews, action based sequences and humour. The film will be both an adventure story and an intimate account of the way of life of a group of artists.

The film will be shot on High Definition Television so promises to look spectacular. We will pay attention to the 'look' of the film - especially to the use of colour and landscape in the narrative. Aerial footage of the country and the journey will be a vital component.

Commentary and subtitles will be used where necessary.

The soundtrack is likely to incorporate indigenous music as well as popular country and western. These elements will be incorporated into the sound design and soundtrack.

Minimal archive footage and photos of historical events may illustrate relevant stories about the past. Celebrated paintings of the key artists will be used.

## Traditional Culture and Dreaming

Balgo stands on the Luurnpa (kingfisher) Dreaming track in an area much trafficked by ancestral beings. It is a ceremonial hub for the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and western desert.



For thousands of years Aboriginals survived here by following an intricate map of dreaming tracks. These song lines crisscrossed the country and were an essential part of the fabric of Aboriginal society. They held cultural, spiritual, social and economic value and contained information vital for survival.

The map was 'learnt' through story and/or song and the words provided information which indicated the characteristics of particular sites where fresh water might be located or places where family members were born. The song might describe what measures needed to be undertaken to ensure their continuation, for example, through ritual. According to Berndt<sup>1</sup> some of this information was transmitted during early childhood or in the course of initiation but much was mediated through the myths performed either as dances or in song. This information was not fanciful but in fact highly practical and it is what kept their culture intact for more than 40,000 years until the arrival of the white man.

## History of White Contact

The 19<sup>th</sup> century European explorers who first set foot in this region regarded it as nothing but 'an unbounded waste of sandy ridges, low rocky hillocks ... one impenetrable desert' (AC Gregory 1854). And a 'terrible region' (Giles 1876).

But by the late 1800's the region to the North of the Great Sandy Desert had been opened up by pastoralists who brought in cattle and forcibly pushed the local tribes off their land. A gold rush in Hall's Creek in 1885 resulted in a huge influx of fortune seekers exacerbating the colonial impact on Aboriginal culture. The introduced cattle, sheep, donkeys and goats soon diminished the supply of native animals and plants leaving many Aboriginal families starving. Aboriginals became increasingly dependent upon rations and handouts from the government and station owners. If ever Aboriginals were suspected of killing or stealing cattle

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<sup>1</sup> *The Walmadjeri and Gugadja* Ronald Berndt in 'Hunters and Gatherers Today' Ed M.G. Bicchieri 1972.

then the reprisals were brutal. Massacres were a common form of punishment and occurred right up until the 1930's.

Aboriginal people began working as stockmen in exchange for food and a place to live with their extended families. For those unable to provide free labour for the *gadiya* (white man), the West Australian Government established 'ration stations'. The establishment of the Canning Stock route which was used to drive cattle to southern markets led to water points being fenced off making it virtually impossible for the Walmajarri and Wangkajunga who were West and South West of Balgo to continue living in their own country. In 1939 the Catholic Church set up Balgo Mission as an oasis for desert tribes. At 300 kms south of Hall's Creek it was intended as a buffer for many western desert people who were drifting North and suffering the consequences of contact with the pastoralists and police.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War the Australian Army established ammunition dumps in the Great Sandy Desert displacing many Kukatja and Ngarti from their territory pushing them towards Balgo. Within a couple of decades conditions had also deteriorated to the east and to the south causing members of the Warlpiri and Pintupi tribes to seek food and shelter at Balgo. Up until the late 50's desert tribes were able to combine a life of visiting the mission, staying out in their traditional lands, or working in varying capacities on pastoral stations with maintaining ceremonies. Many of Balgo's senior artists today grew up under these conditions.

In 1969 the introduction of equal wages meant many Aboriginal stockmen lost their jobs and were forced to gravitate towards the missions.

By the mid 1970's Balgo had a population of 1000 Aboriginals, this later dropped back to 500 or so once the out-station movement had encouraged people to move back to their country or live on smaller settlements.

The growth of Aboriginal controlled settlements boosted morale and enabled people to reconnect with many of their traditional customs, rituals and ancestral land. Better road access and the widespread use of Toyotas has improved links with other communities, and helped reunite family groups.

Despite improved conditions most Aboriginal communities suffer from poor health and education services, and few employment opportunities. Alcoholism, youth suicide and petrol sniffing is at epidemic proportions.

It is within this social context that the success of the Aboriginal Art movement is so remarkable.

## The Growth of an Art Movement in Balgo



By the late 1970's Balgo artists were aware of the western inspired art movement flourishing in communities like Papunya and Yuendumu.

In 1984 acrylics were introduced to Balgo which offered artists a wide range of colours with which to paint replacing the traditional ochres, plant and animal material used in body, cave and sand paintings. In 1986 the first Balgo exhibition was held at the Art Gallery of WA and 12 months later the artists formed their own cooperative, Warlayirti Artists. (Warlayirti is another name for Luurnpa, the ancestral kingfisher of the Kukatja people who led them to their country south of Balgo).

Since then Warlayirti Artists has gone from strength to strength and in the last year has moved into a specially designed building. The centre acts as the

mediator between artists and the industry, providing indigenous people with facilities and materials to produce paintings. Tim Acker and Erica Izett have been the coordinators since May 1999.

Balgo artists are renown for their sense of colour and will paint 'country', food-gathering and initiation stories as well as stories which reflect the major myths and events of the Dreaming. The pattern and colour in some Balgo paintings is reminiscent of a tribal carpet.

'The paintings depict the earth from an omnipotent point of view. Dry watercourses, rock-holes, sand hills and clay pans are all patterned into the painting with the careful use of dots and thick brushstrokes which illustrate a

mythological landscape, invisible yet pervasive and invoking a feeling for the sanctity of nature'.<sup>2</sup>

Concentric circles, animal and human prints, body marking, and coolamons record the events that imbue a landscape rich with meaning for its Aboriginal inhabitants. Their work alerts us to the spiritual value of the landscape and a sense of reverie in which each artist attempts to infuse the land with their power.

Luminescence and brilliance of colour has become a Balgo trademark.

Many artists are now in their prime and have become more conscious of their work as 'art' rather than just as a visual history of their country. They have developed a freer more 'painterly' style, which goes beyond being Aboriginal art but becoming modern art.

Several Dreaming Stories are important to Balgo residents. In particular the *Luurnpa* (kingfisher) tells the story of a man who is being monstered by a wild dingo in his own country. In order to survive he must travel across the land looking for help. He turns into a Kingfisher and many of the places he flies to indicate natural soaks. He travels south from Balgo onto Lake Mackay and via another dreaming track the same character finally ends up at Uluru before returning again to Balgo.



To mark the strong Dreaming ties between Balgo and the desert communities to the south a large canvas was painted depicting the *Luurnpa*. It was given to the traditional owners at the formal handover ceremony for Uluru (Ayers Rock) in 1985. Through painting many aspects of Aboriginal culture can thrive. In the past year Warlayirti has had a \$1million turnover providing a much needed injection of money into the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Warlayirti brochure

## Treatment



*The following is a brief outline of events likely to take place based upon research already undertaken to give the reader a feel for the story's potential.*



A dark skinned finger gently traces a circular shape in fine red sand. Another dark skinned finger traces a circular shape in white paint on a watermelon sized breast gleaming in oils. Dark skinned hands push splodges of brightly coloured paint onto a canvas.



Throughout the above we see dissolving images of aerial visions of the land. Spinifex grasses, red sand hills, rocky mesas.

TITLE: *PAINTING THE COUNTRY*

## Balgo Community

Commentary may be used to introduce the community explaining where its inhabitants come from and their strong links with traditional culture. It will state that Balgo is one of Australia's most important centres for Aboriginal art.

We establish Balgo as a community. It's early morning and people are asleep in rumpled bedding around dormant campfires. Dogs roam the empty red dirt streets in packs barking at the camera. Upturned car wrecks, litter, a 'no grog allowed' sign, and houses with high wire fences create an image of a place under siege.



Amidst all this a church bell rings and a few white people emerge from the side door of a stone church with a bell tower. They have been at an early Morning Prayer session.

On the edge of town overlooking both the sandy desert and the rubbish dump lies a brand new single story building with a verandah around three sides. This is the home of Warlayirti Artists and there is already a queue of people waiting for its doors to open.

A slender gracious woman in her early thirties arrives in a fluster apologising to everyone for being late. The Aboriginal people greet Erica. The door opens.

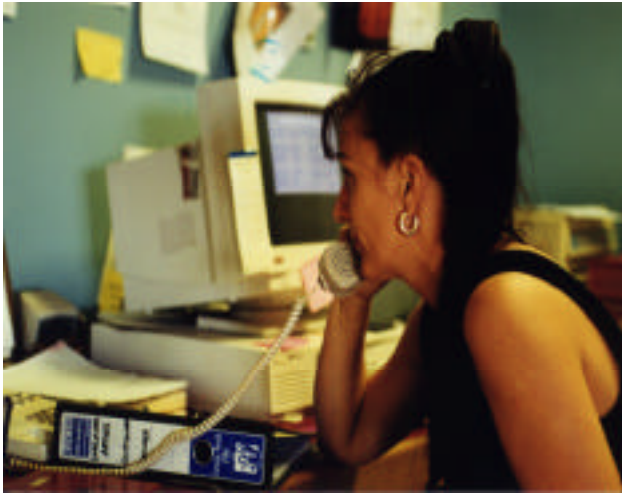
Dark skinned hands grab tiny plastic tubs of brightly coloured paint from the shelves – sky blue, sunflower yellow, plum purple, psychedelic orange and cyclamen pink.



### Lucy and Helicopter

An elderly woman with kind eyes and matted dark hair is hunched over a canvas. She daubs vivid blue paint onto the canvas in thick splodges, occasionally wiping some on her scruffy floral dress, which has been repaired by hand several times. In the centre of her work is a black circular shape. Lucy Yukenbarri tells us this is a rockhole and is an important part of her country. She describes what the other symbols mean and tells us more about her country and the country of her mother and father – wishing she could return there one day. The painting is a reverie of colours and patterns, which dance around the canvas with extraordinary energy.

A middle-aged man wearing a red and navy football beanie is quietly humming over his painting. He has a long scraggy beard, a wizened face and cheeky eyes. Helicopter is painting a large canvas, which is a joyous rhythm of yellow and white wavy lines, which interweave. He works the paint from each colour into the previous colour. The effect is mesmerising and would match the work of the world's greatest modern artists.



Erica is on the phone describing what Warlayirti Artists is about. She explains that the centre is run by the community and provides all materials free to any artist who wishes to paint. They have 300 on their books. We intercut her phone conversation with shots of the artists at work. She continues and is negotiating the sale of a particular piece over the phone. She hangs up and is extremely excited and tells us she's just

made a great sale via the Adelaide Arts Festival Exhibition.

She rushes out and tells both Helicopter and Lucy that their work has sold. They nod with pleasure but continue to paint. The sale appears to be irrelevant to the work they are currently involved in.

Erica uses their reaction to tell us how the money is important but ultimately painting for these artists is an opportunity to reconnect with their country and their ancestral Dreamtime stories. She uses the analogy of a Buddhist monk who meditates and chants in order to attain enlightenment. 'For these artists painting is an act of meditation – it is their chance to get closer to the dreamtime.'

It's payday and many artists are waiting patiently for their cheques. Many are old artists who are flanked by their relatives. Erica is seated at the computer and methodically checks each artist's bank account on the screen. She explains that the centre manages the artists' accounts. Every time a work is sold 70% goes into the artists' bank account and 30% goes to Warlayirti to cover overheads and materials. Erica calls up Helicopter and explains he has \$700 in his account. How much does he want? Helicopter holds up two fingers and points to himself and then his son. Each finger represents \$50. He wants \$100 for himself and \$100 for his son. He wants to give some to another family member but Erica cautions him that he needs to go slowly



otherwise it will all be gone. She gently explains that 'maybe next week the money from that Darwin exhibition will come through'.



Another artist is not so lucky. She has nothing in her account. She cannot believe there is no money there and keeps asking Erica 'where is my money? Where is my money?'

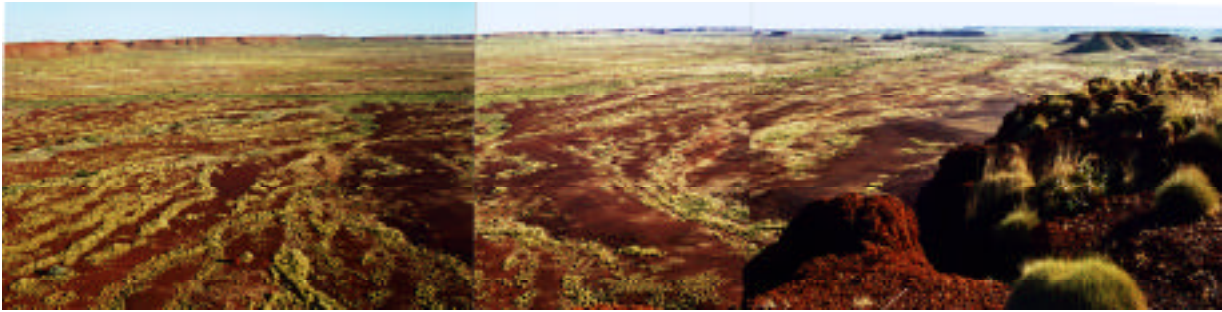
Erica explains that many artists immediately give all the money to their friends and relatives when they've had a sale. It's the Aboriginal way to share whatever they have. The trouble is that when they get old and no longer paint because they are too sick or have gone blind, they have no money left.

It's a fine balancing act to be constructive, not patronising.

As soon as each person is paid they walk up to the community store to cash in their cheque. The store is inside a big tin shed with an adjoining annex. The sun is already fiercely hot and a group of people are seated on the concrete floor of the annex playing cards. Cards are a popular form of gambling in communities. But the money which changes hands is usually small change and if someone loses everything then in Aboriginal way everyone looks after each other.

Inside the store Helicopter and Lucy go to cash their cheques. The store manager is frantic complaining that he does not have enough cash to cover all these cheques. They are patient and eventually get their money. They buy some food. The shelves are lined with items like tinned meat, white bread, and fruit and vegetables at exorbitant prices. One stalk of broccoli - \$5. Many kids hang around inside looking for something to do.

We go back to Lucy and Helicopter's place and see their home environment. The conditions are basic and would shock most urban dwellers in Australia. Helicopter tells us that he got his name many years ago when he broke his leg whilst mending fences for the Mission. A helicopter from a nearby cattle station gave him a ride to the hospital 300 km's away. It was his first time in such a machine and the name stuck. Now he has flown to Darwin and Melbourne staging exhibitions of his own.



The sun sets over the Pound – a huge expanse of flat desert land, which lies next to Balgo. Circling the Pound are red rocky mesas, which turn gold, red and purple in the evening light.

In the centre of the community a group of teenagers play basketball under lights at night.

The next day a plane is circling Balgo and comes into land on the dirt airstrip. Erica and her partner Tim Acker have come to meet Kim Akerman, an anthropologist and museum curator who worked in the Kimberley for many years and is one of the few white people to understand and be initiated in Aboriginal law. He has mapped all of the traditional songlines for Balgo and the neighbouring language groups and has a vast knowledge of how their myth relates to their art.

The plane comes to a stop and the side door flings open. Kim gets out and greets Erica and Tim. They travel back to the art centre. On the way Kim explains to us his relationship with the community and that he has returned to partake in a journey with the artists through country to map the songline of the Kingfisher dreaming.

## Planning the journey

There is a meeting at the centre of all the artists. They discuss the forthcoming trip indicating how important it will be for people to return to their country. There is much discussion about who are



the custodians, who will go and which genders can travel through particular country. It is clear there is a hierarchy amongst the artists as to which family groups hold power over the decisions. Kim pulls out a huge map and traces the journey of the Kingfisher Dreaming. It travels south from Balgo onto Lake Mackay, down through Warburton and eventually via another story onto Ayers Rock in Central Australia. It is one of THE great mythological journeys for Aboriginal Australia. The journey as the crow flies is about 700 kilometres. But with stops and detours is likely to be much more than that. There is much discussion over the correct route. Many of the elders have different versions of where the kingfisher went. It is clear that these stories have been passed down for generations but over time have become fragmented. This makes the journey even more important – to reconnect with the original songline. Eventually 5 women and 5 men are chosen to participate. They include Lucy Yukenbarri and Helicopter who are inseparable, Bai Bai, John Lee and Mati who is a key law woman and healer at Balgo.

There is much talk about what must be taken – art supplies, ceremonial items, food, water, fuel and bedding. There will be some talk about why this trip is important and what they are likely to achieve along the way. Certainly any time the artists return to their country their work improves dramatically.

### Preparation

There will be a sequence, which will show preparation for the journey. Ordering fuel, food, supplies. Gathering art materials, paints, colours, canvas, and ceremonial items. Erica is also planning to organise an exhibition of the work at the end of the trip in Alice Springs. The vehicles are loaded – 3 large 4 wheel drive Toyotas.



Evening. The community performs a ceremonial dance to farewell the group. Sunset. Images of painted breasts, stomping and shuffling feet in the dust. Waving arms, singing and the sound of clapping and didgeridoo fill the air. The vibrations of the feet stamping blend in with the music.



## On the road

Last minute disasters, mix-ups and loading up will be recorded.

The convoy of Toyotas heads off down the dusty red dirt road and out through the Pound. We see spectacular sand mesas, spinifex plains and rocky outcrops. We will use aerial shots of the expedition at this point to situate Balgo as an isolated place in the middle of 'nowhere' serving to highlight the adventure side of the trip.

The convoy goes through Yagga Yagga, an out-station about 100 kilometres south of Balgo. It is a tiny settlement made up of various tin shelters or 'humpies', a few houses, a water pump and a store. It's possible the group may pick up another person who has been out hunting or doing law for days on end. A small explanation about the importance of the out-station movement may be included here.

The journey continues and throughout we focus on both Lucy and Helicopter as our central Aboriginal artists. We will show their emotional responses as they move through the country, pointing out various important sites from their memory. The other artists will also feature, as events demand their input.

Kim, Erica and Tim will play a key role in providing interpretation when necessary for the artists. They will also be characters in the film.

Along the way the artists indicate a rocky outcrop and tell us to stop. We follow them as they scramble up the side of the cliff and reveal some spectacular rock paintings. They talk about the paintings, who did them and acknowledge this is

the first time they have been here for years. They reflect how their work has changed and that now they use bright colours not ochres anymore. They save the ochres for ceremonial work like this or body painting.

It's late afternoon and camp is set for the night. There is a dramatic difference between the how much stuff the white people have compared to the Aboriginals. A fire is lit and food prepared. Someone makes damper, tea and meat is cooked on the fire.

A campfire will be a perfect opportunity for discussion about one of the Dreaming stories or information about the artists past which will help an audience to understand their background. For example Bai Bai is a senior law woman and travelled the country extensively as a youngster. She is likely to tell us how white pastoralists shot her father. He was one of the many Aboriginal people who lost their lives as a result of the white man taking over Aboriginal country for their own economic needs. Tjumpo's parents also died of thirst at a water hole along the route we will take. Stories like the above and more will be revealed in a manner which will provide the audience with a deeper understanding of the impact of white settlement on these remarkable people. Archive may be used to illustrate events.



**Travelling Through Country**  
It is impossible to state exactly what will take place on this trip but the above should give readers a feel for the intended style.

We want to use the journey to reveal how important country is to these artists. There will be several sites along the way, which hold special importance to both men and women. It is likely that small ceremonies will be held at particular places. These ceremonies can be simply 'smoking' the country, singing or placing items on particular

rocks and cleaning water holes or soaks. Either way there will be plenty of opportunity for story, action and humour.

The artists will go hunting for sand goanna, lizards, bush turkey, wallaby and kangaroo. They will also hunt for witchetty grubs, and juicy frogs, which bury themselves deep in the sand plains and contain water. There will also be various plants and berries which are tasty and in season. Wild tomatoes, yams and bush potatoes can be eaten and various seed which can be used to make bread. Some plants are suitable for healing. We will witness how water is found in the desert.

All these activities will serve to enrich the picture of the life and memory of these artists. Naturally a major role of the trip is to stimulate the artists to paint the country and sites which carry story.

Mishaps are bound to occur such as car trouble, getting bogged, sickness and being uncertain as to which direction to take. In a case like this the custodians are likely to get up on the roof of the 4W Drive and 'sing' their way through the country to decide where to go. It's possible that along the way the group will bump into people they know and reunite with long lost relatives which could be a catalyst to ceremony, dance or simply a country and western sing-a-long by the campfire.



We aim to stick close to both Lucy and Helicopter so that we witness the journey very much through them and via our white advisers who will help translate and decode the Aboriginal experience. Value will be placed on both stories about contemporary life as well as the Dreaming and law. We may hear about the early days of white contact, being brought up in dormitories at the mission, working for nothing as

stockmen and then rediscovering their culture and respect through painting. Some of this historical material may include archive footage to help illustrate events.

The story of the *Luurnpa* and story about law will be woven into the journey.

Another place we are likely to pass is Lake Mackay, which is a huge salt lake and is usually just crusty and dry. It is surrounded by red dunes and is quite spectacular. Further south lies Warburton, a small community of about 200 people. It has a few houses, a store, a roadhouse and an art centre. It's possible the path may also go through the out-station of Kintore in the Northern Territory. Finally we will reach Katatjuta (Olgas) and Uluru (Ayers Rock).

Ayers Rock can be seen from a vast distance and when it looms up over the horizon it should be quite a powerful moment for our group – many whom have only heard about it through legend. We will use aerials during this sequence.

Once the group reaches their destination the mood may change as we emerge from the wilderness and are suddenly hit with the crass tourism of the area. The

contrast between this bunch of rather shabby, grubby Aboriginal artists and the tour bus crowd should be quite confronting. The intention is that tourists at the rock may look at the group with awe and distaste whilst the audience by this stage will hold them in utmost respect.

It is possible a ceremonial dance may be done at Uluru to celebrate the journey, the Dreaming and different tribes.

END



## Access

Electric Pictures and Robin Eastwood Productions have an established track record in making films in the Kimberley region (*The Human Race*, and productions with Japanese companies)

Sally Ingleton and Robin Eastwood recently visited Balgo and discussed this project with Art Coordinators Erica Izett, Tim Acker and various community members. The community has met to discuss the project and has embraced the concept with enthusiasm.

We have also held discussion with anthropologist Kim Akerman who was the former Curator of Pre History at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. He has studied the Dreaming Tracks of this region and has been fully initiated in Aboriginal law. He has asked to be part of the journey and could play an invaluable role in cultural liaison and interpreting.