

Spinifex: Aboriginal Paintings from the Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi Collection

Seattle-based art collectors Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi have worked for almost thirty years to assemble one of the preeminent collections of Australian Aboriginal art in the United States. The works in this exhibition are drawn from the sustained attention that Kaplan and Levi have invested in the remote Aboriginal community of Tjuntjuntjara, an important cultural center in what is known as Spinifex Country.

The traditional lands of the Pila Nguru, or Spinifex people, are in Western Australia's Great Victoria Desert--the largest in the country--and border South Australia. Their name comes from the tall grasses that are the dominant plant species in that part of the desert, a region they have inhabited for tens of thousands of years.

The Spinifex people were dispossessed and placed in Christian missions when their lands were designated by the British and Australian governments for atomic testing between 1952 and 1957. In the 1980s the Spinifex people returned to settle at Tjuntjuntjara. In 1997 they founded the Spinifex Arts Project to record in large collaborative paintings their role as Traditional Owners of the Spinifex Country. The paintings were key pieces of evidence in the legal argument to prove a Native Title Claim to their land, which they won in 2000.

The Spinifex people of Tjuntjuntjara continue to paint Jukurpa, or traditional sacred stories that are connected to the land. They work primarily now as solo artists, but also in collectives of men or women. Sometimes up to eight or more people at a time, collaborate on large paintings to document their heritage. An example of one of these paintings is on view in this exhibition.