

*The Art of Everyday Storytelling*  
**HERMANNNSBURG  
POTTERY**

by Heidi McKenzie



Judith Pungkarta Inkamala's *Albert Namatjira, 2017*. Photo: Sabbia Gallery.



1 Heidi McKenzie's demo with Rona Panangka Rubuntja (left) and Hayley Coulthard (right). Photo: Gabrielle Wallington. 2 Outside view of Hermansburgh Pottery. 3 MacDonnell Ranges in Hermansburgh, Australia. Photo: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.

Last November, I found myself driving my hatchback rental car along the nearly-deserted Larapinta Drive, about 50 miles (130 km) south west of Alice Springs. The journey is breathtakingly stunning, nestled within the MacDonnell Ranges, deep in the heart of the Northern Territories of Australia. Destination: Hermansburgh Pottery. Midway through my three-month artist residency at the Armory in Sydney's Olympic Park, I had secured a small research grant from the Canadian Consular Office in Sydney, and ambitiously set out to reunite with the Ernabella artists I had met three years previously in Jingdezhen, China. Geography and logistics derailed me. Visiting Hermansburgh was more feasible. When I walked into what was clearly a former one-room school house, I had no expectations. The five hours I subsequently spent with the women of the Hermansburgh Pottery was a gift—a portal into a world about which I had no understanding previously, and now, can only profess to possess an inkling.

### Resisting Type-Casting

I think it's fair to generalize that most Westerners have a preconceived idea that all Aboriginal Australian art is about the Dreaming or creation myth stories, and for the most part are comprised of dot paintings. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Hermansburgh potters categorically resist this type-casting. Their art showcases the imagination and humor of every individual; it is both narrative and figurative, and it features land as an integral part of life, culture, custom, and spiritual practice. It is the ceramic incarnation of the art of everyday storytelling.

Hermansburgh Pottery is an Aboriginal corporation that has been running for 28 years. It was founded in 1990 when Manhattan-raised, Israeli-trained, Jewish potter, Naomi Sharp, presented herself for service. Sharp had a significant influence on shaping the creative direction of the largely women's collective. In addition to working with the local Aranda women, she travelled weekly to several of the 40 outstations within a 70-kilometer radius of the mission. She set out to ignite the artists' imaginations by exposing them to imagery of exotic animals, birds, and flowers, the likes of which they had never seen. She also strategically showed them images of Aboriginal women in Papua New Guinea making ceramics, and slowly but surely a group of women came together and formed the cooperative that is now the internationally recognized and collected Hermansburgh Pottery.

### Creative Roots

Today, Hermansburgh is one of Australia's smallest municipalities; the last census enumerated just under 500 residents. What used to be known as Ntaria began as a small Lutheran mission in 1877, an offspring of the original Hermansburgh in Germany whose evangelical reach extended to India, Africa, and desert nomadic



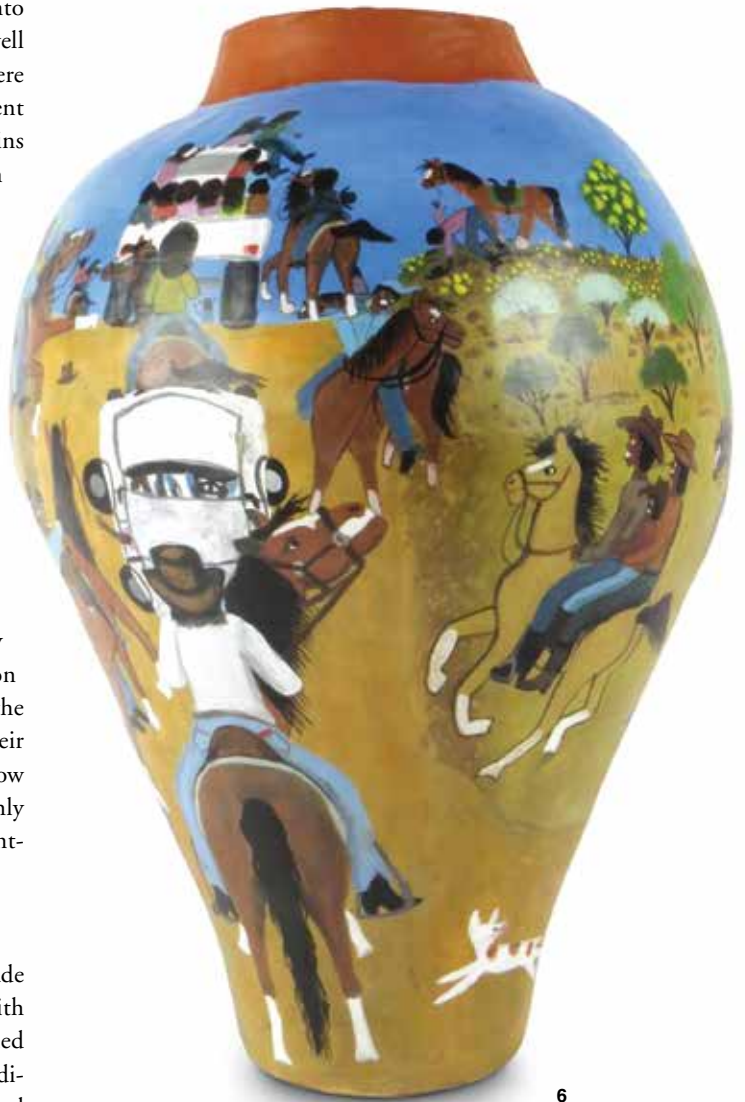


Australia. By 1904, the New Testament had been translated into Aranda, and school children learned English and German, as well as their native tongue. Following Aranda cultural norms, boys were segregated from the girls, a practice that ripples through to present day. While a few men have transited through, the pottery remains largely the domain of the women. However, its creative roots can be attributed to men, and to one man in particular—possibly the most famous Aboriginal man in all of Australia, and the first Aboriginal to be granted citizenship—Albert Namatjira. Most of the Hermannsburg potters can trace their lineage directly or circuitously back to Namatjira, whose tragically brief life (1902–59) impacted so many. Namatjira displayed early aptitude in arts and crafts. When Melbourne-based artist Rex Battarbee ventured into Aranda territory in the 1930s, his express purpose was to impart the fine art of landscape watercolor painting to Aboriginal locals. Namatjira quickly established himself as the Westerner’s most gifted apprentice and camel wrangler, and in 1932 Battarbee arranged Namatjira’s first solo exhibition in Alice Springs to heralded acclaim.

Judith Pungkarta Inkamala, current chairperson of the Pottery and Anita Ratara Mbitjana, the senior-most member present on the day I visited, recounted their memories of spending time at the heels of their uncles and the men Namatjira taught, washing their paintbrushes and admiring the men’s work. Little did they know that they were absorbing through osmosis what has become a highly sophisticated practice of narrative, figurative, and landscape painting on clay.

#### A Practice Through Osmosis

The Hermannsburg pots are typically hand-coiled vessels made from commercial terra cotta, burnished and then decorated with underglazes. Each pot has a corresponding lid with a hand-modeled animal or human figurine—quite possibly a throwback to a tradition that was initiated in the 1970s of making figurines for the local tourist market from Alice Springs or nearby King’s Canyon out of plasticine or locally sourced clay. I found each artist working from a set of 10 to 20 different underglazes arranged in much the same



4 Judith Pungkarta Inkamala working in the pottery. 5 Rona Panangka Rubuntja with figure. 6 Rona Panangka Rubuntja’s *Kalporyal Day*. Photo: Sabbia Gallery.



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7 Anita Ratara Mbitjana's *Palm Valley*, 3 in. (8 cm) in height. In the collection of Heidi McKenzie. 8 Installation view of the "Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia" exhibition at Jam Factory's satellite location in Seppeltsfield. Pots by Rahel Kngwarria Ungrwanaka: *Tjwanpa* (left), *Kurrkurrka (Boobook Owl)* (right).

way as a painter's palette. The women's creations often reverse the color layering technique of the Namatjira antecedents, riffing with brightly colored pink or orange mountain ranges and intensely surreal skies. The small piece I brought home with me was one of Mbitjana's. At the time, its lid was still in the firing process. It quite simply depicts the beauty of Palm Valley, her ancestral land, at sunset. Mbitjana's daughter, niece, and grandson are all part of the collective's current roster. Much of their work recounts specific encounters or friezes of important social gatherings, often with cheeky twists. The vessels are "marvelous hybrids, perfect spherical forms wrapped in Namatjira-like landscapes with figurines and animals seated on their lids, surveying the landscape and all who come here."<sup>1</sup>

### Introductions and Long-Standing Relationships

The current manager of the Hermannsburg Pottery, Gabrielle Wallington, is employed by the Australian Government and the program is funded through the Department of Communication and the Arts, Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support program. Wallington is a fresh-faced, calm, and remarkably well-travelled potter. Her pedagogical pedigree began under the tutelage of Janet de Boos and Greg Daly at Australia National University in Canberra, out of which sprang an international semester abroad at Canada's prestigious Emily Carr University of Art and Design, working with Paul Mathieu. She subsequently plunged into a six-month, wood-firing apprenticeship with Josh Copus in North Carolina, and then worked with Tara Wilson at Red Lodge Clay Center in Red Lodge, Montana, as well as Josh DeWeese at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana. She found herself working at a pottery in Chile—from which she Skyped in for her job interview with Hermannsburg. Wallington prepared sandwiches for the potters, and after a couple of hours of simply being with the artists, observing and asking them questions about what they were working on over lunch and tea, Wallington introduced me as a potter to the group. Rona Panangka Rubuntja, one of the most prolific potters in the group, initiated a non-verbal, gestural, two-way 20-questions with me as I explained myself and my heritage to the group. Wallington opened the floor for me to demo a new tool I had brought to share. I had intuited that the pottery might not have Surforms, so I had purchased a few at a local hardware store in Sydney and gifted them to the group. Rubuntja and Mbitjana's daughter Hayley Panangka Coulthard showed great interest in the demo that I ad-libbed.

Two days later I was in Adelaide attending Tarnanthi, the biannual festival of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander indigenous arts. I made the pilgrimage out of town to the Jam Factory's satellite venue in Seppeltsfield to experience "Clay Stories: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramics from Remote Australia," a nationally touring exhibition of 23 Aboriginal ceramicists from 5 different arts centers, including works by many of the artists I had just spent time with in Hermannsburg. Today, the Hermannsburg Pottery has recently established representation with Sydney-based Sabbia Gallery, which also has a long-standing relationship with the Ernabella Potters. The Hermannsburg potters' work has been acquired by over 30 galleries, museums, and collectors nationally, and they have completed over a dozen significant mural commissions including one for Sydney's Taronga Zoo. What started as a training program on a tarp under a tree, has since become an internationally renowned art movement, lead and sustained by a dedicated group of women.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Isaacs, *Hermannsburg Potters: Aranda Artists of Central Australia* (Sydney, Australia: Craftsman House, 2000), p.13.