

## **“MY COLOUR COUNTRY”: LANDSCAPE AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE ART OF GINGER RILEY MUNDUWALAWALA**

Lucy Ellem

In a landmark retrospective exhibition held in 1997,<sup>1</sup> the National Gallery of Victoria showed the work of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala. The art of an aboriginal artist working in a Western rather than indigenous colour tradition and exhibiting in a specific Western context (the art museum) invites analysis in Western terms; yet the spiritualisation of the landscape itself – both in Riley’s consciousness and in his artistic expression – demands that a reconciliation be found between this secular and Western context and the symbolic content of his art. This reconciliation is found through colour. The following reflections on the Ginger Riley exhibition present an interpretation of Riley’s art and one way of reading his work, based on universal laws of colour.

Ginger Riley’s landscapes are symbolic, telling and retelling the narrative of their creation and the mythic events that shaped them. Using brilliant, synthetic colour, and viewing the land laterally in Western perspective, his landscape art is not “traditional” in the usual sense in which that word is applied to the art of Aboriginal peoples: it does not use ochre pigments, bark, or dots, or a ritual imagery of circles. It transcends anthropological definitions. Yet his art draws on the same spiritual traditions, on the same sense of unbroken continuity, through totem or spirit ancestors, generation after generation, from the first cosmogenesis to the present; and it expresses the same profound sense of identity with place. However varied the paintings themselves, however much they express the lived experience of landscape in present time, the subject of Riley’s paintings is always the same, the Dreaming, “the quintessence of reality for Australian Aborigines” as Max Charlesworth notes:

[The Dreaming] refers to the primordial shaping of the earth by the Ancestor Spirits and their giving to each Aboriginal people its moral and social Law. It also refers to the persistence of the spiritual power of the Ancestor Spirits in the land, as well as to

the personal life-plan of each individual, which originates in his or her spirit-assisted conception.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, each individual has his or her own Dreaming, or story, which is itself linked with the Creation Dreaming. Riley's paintings are concerned with creation narratives; they also narrate his own spiritual biography and his intimate connections with his totem-ancestor, the Sea Eagle.

At once cosmic and profoundly personal, Riley's art is isolated from the material conditions of his daily existence, and at least on the surface, from the horrific events of his people's recent past.<sup>3</sup> His art seeks to recreate the mythic act of creation that is continually evidenced by the sentinels of his land – the mountains, rivers, gorges, and islands of his "mother country" – a creation continually present and renewed in the cycle of nature. Riley calls this his "colour country", a landscape of the mind, expressed in the brightest colour Western technology can produce.<sup>4</sup> This paper explores the ways in which colour interacts with the sense of place to heighten its mystery, its spiritual power.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala was born around 1937 in south-east Arnhem Land, in the coastal saltwater country of the Mara people, near where the powerful snake ancestor, Garimala, still lives, according to the Mara belief. Riley is rooted in this country, his "mother country", a region about fifty-five kilometers inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria on the Limmen Bight River, for which he is *jungkayi* (custodian).<sup>5</sup> His strong sense of identity comes from his intimate connection with this land. "I'm from saltwater country", he proclaims; "I just call myself a saltwater man".<sup>6</sup> Riley's phrase, "my colour country",<sup>7</sup> expresses in terms of colour the artist's profound affinity with the land – his ancestors and his personal stories are linked with the landscape of which he is custodian. His paintings are like the land itself – built up layer upon layer, "vertically" from the surface (he works with his canvas flat on the ground). "It is all my mother country, I have to see it, it must be bright."<sup>8</sup>

Saltwater Country (Yellow Rain) of 1988 (Collection Beverly and Anthony Knight) [fig. 4] shows this country as Riley sees it. Here, it is topographical colour which, like the forms of the landscape, identifies the

spiritual narrative. The Mara people believe that spirit ancestors are still present in this land. They remain as a living presence in the landscape, living beneath the ground, or in a land mass, river or waterhole created on their journeys at the beginning of time. Through the cycles of nature – the dry and wet seasons, the rain and rainbow, in gestation and growth – their power energises, sustains and protects. Riley's heightened natural colour expresses the spiritual power of elemental forces. Simplifying and augmenting atmospheric light effects, he counterpoints the intensely yellow light which often precedes a storm against the steel blue of approaching rain clouds. Land and vegetation are also depicted in heightened colour, red soil intensified to vermilion, bright yellow earth striped with green vegetation. The blackness of a hill is silhouetted against a radiant setting sun, while long, sharp shadows of trees and rocks further elaborate specific time and weather. Riley uses contrast of hue (red against green) or of tone (yellow against dark green), retaining each colour's natural brilliance and luminosity. Borders separate colour areas and help maintain their intensity.

This dramatic interplay of landscape and storm event expressed through heightened natural colour might be compared to the landscapes of Van Gogh, equally transfused with spiritual significance. In *Olive Trees*, 1889 (Minneapolis Institute of Art), Vincent Van Gogh transforms the landscape under a brilliant yellow sky and, through divorcing the radiant sun from its cast shadows, suspends time. (Riley in *Saltwater Country* (*Yellow Rain*) also separates shadows from their light source, but perhaps through a naive understanding of Western landscape conventions, rather than by deliberate contravention). Van Gogh's painting of olive trees under a blazing yellow sky contrasts with his more sombre depiction<sup>9</sup> of the same olive grove which referred to Christ's agony in the Garden of Olives; in *Olive Trees*, the heightened brilliance of colour and bold defiance of the laws of nature suggest the Resurrection.

However, colour expression based on nature is only part of the story. In *Mara Country* of 1988 (Collection Beverly and Anthony Knight) [fig. 5], colour is symbolic rather than natural. This painting is assembled in a ritualistic manner, using a hierarchy of scale which makes the human

figures subordinate to their spirit ancestors. The most important of the latter are the creator snake, Garimala, and the avenging dragon, Bulukbun. Together with Ngak Ngak, the Sea Eagle (Riley's totem ancestor), the Shark and the Plains Kangaroo – all important in Riley's Dreaming or that of his immediate ancestors – these images are displayed in magnified scale and iconic distribution. Following Mara law, aspects of the painting are secret, and may be painted but not spoken.<sup>10</sup>

The colours of this work are the four psychological primaries, red, blue, yellow and green, the colours that the mind sees as unique and distinctive. (The violet that appears at a distance is actually made up of red dots on a blue ground). These colours are generally used at an intensity approximating spectral purity. The yellow dots create a pulsating luminous aura surrounding the central field which contains nearly all the images. Using only primary colour, the anti-illusionistic, flat decorative patterns (often with contrasting borders) and simple shapes allow each colour to sing of its own special character.

Riley has the colourist's love of pure colour, and the use of the four psychological primaries calls attention to the inner qualities of these colours, evoking a sense of the essential existence of the icons depicted. These four colours are the absolutes, the irreducibles of colour perception; boldly displayed here, they emphasise the absolute certainty of the creation narrative and the law.

The question of psychological colour is important, for it underscores the complexity of the colour phenomenon, the mysterious ways (even for modern science) in which colour works to affect the mind and the emotions. Colour perception is a complex series of events, usually triggered by energy impulses – known as "light" – from the external world (that is, the world outside of ourselves). It is in the mind that the qualitative transformation of energy – the explosion of energy into colour – actually occurs. Colour is ultimately a mental phenomenon.

Because colour is a mental phenomenon, all sorts of interactions and transferences are possible. Colours have temperature (we speak of warm and cool colours); they have weight, spatial properties such as proximity and

distance, extension and contraction, and for some synaesthetes, even taste, scent and sound. Colours evoke emotional response, and are often seen as cheerful or sad. The effect of colour is not limited to the mind and the emotions – colour is a whole-body phenomenon. For example, red actually speeds up metabolism and heartbeat, literally energising the whole body. Blue on the other hand is calming; it slows metabolism and heart rate and induces relaxation. It is these intrinsic, inherent properties of colour that allow its exploitation for expressive purposes. Because colour has such profound psychological resonance, it has easily assimilated symbolic values.

The psychological effects of colour were first systematically examined by the great German poet and author Johann von Goethe in a scientific treatise on colour which he published in 1810. Goethe drew attention to the subjective effects of colour on the observer. Colour is “immediately associated with the emotions of the mind”, he wrote; “If the artist abandons himself to his feeling, colour presently announces itself.”<sup>11</sup> Goethe analysed psychological properties such as temperature (warmth or coldness), energy (active or passive, forceful or weak) and spatial properties such as attraction and repulsion, proximity and distance.<sup>12</sup> He attached symbolic qualities to these psychological effects, for example, “retiring” blue induced contemplation.<sup>13</sup>

Goethe also analysed colour character, in which colours took on human qualities; for instance, pure magenta (violet-red) expressed majesty, gravity and dignity. He experimented with the effect of using colour filters to view the landscape, noting that the “impression of warmth may be experienced in a very lively manner if we look at a landscape through a yellow glass, particularly on a grey winter’s day” and that the “appearance of objects seen through a blue glass is gloomy and melancholy.”<sup>14</sup>

Goethe’s colour theory was taken up by the theosophical tradition in the later nineteenth century and on into the art of the early abstractionists, Mondrian and Kandinsky. The latter’s book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912, and a seminal text for twentieth century art, analysed the psychological properties of colour in a symbolic context.

Although the psychological properties of colour did not become the subject of rigorous scientific investigation until the nineteenth century, they had already been enshrined in symbolic tradition for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. In the Christian tradition, for example, the powerful, active presence of red has symbolised, in its association with Christ, the physical presence of the divinity on earth. Passive blue is the colour used for Mary, the gentle mediator, associated with acquiescence and intercession. In Christian art, an intensely blue sky often symbolises an infinitely remote heavenly realm.

The importance of these traditions lies not in the signification of specific colours in the various religious traditions, but in the symbolic process itself which draws on the underlying power of colour to profoundly affect both the physiological and emotional state of the viewer. While I am not suggesting that any of these traditions were direct sources for Ginger Riley's art (although this would not be impossible), they do point to a continuing, and perhaps universal, tradition in the mystical use of colour, based on its psychological properties, which parallels the expressive use of colour in Riley's symbolic landscapes.

For example, red is dynamic, signifying energy and power; in Riley's *Mara Country*, 1988, red is used for Garimala in his transformation as the dragon Bulukbun, the fierce avenger of wrong-doing, punisher of those who break the law. Elsewhere, Riley expresses the anger of this fierce, destructive power by radiant spines which surround the snake like an energy field.<sup>15</sup> Blue, on the other hand, is tranquil. Spatially, blue is retiring, seemingly to endless depths, and lacks the aggressive force of red. Whereas Riley uses red for the powerful Garimala, creator of the physical world, in *Mara Country* blue is used for the setting of mythic events, for the sky and sea and the birds and fishes which dwell in their depths.

Not only individual colours themselves, but the relationships between colours can form part of this symbolic language. Goethe believed colour had an "especially mysterious interpretation",<sup>16</sup> expressing primordial relations of both nature and sight. He held that harmony resided in the complementary contrast of colours, which could express the

relationship between heaven and earth. Van Gogh's aesthetic, too, was formed on complementary contrast and the symbolism of colour relationships. He hoped to express "the love of two lovers by a wedding of two complementary colours, their mingling and their opposition"<sup>17</sup> and "rest or sleep in general" by the balance of all the major pigment complementaries.<sup>18</sup>

Riley's art is notable for its extensive use of true visual complementaries and may be said to be based on an aesthetic of contrast.<sup>19</sup> Harmony based on contrast may derive from observation of natural colour in the landscape, from Western scientific conceptions of colour, or from Aboriginal conceptions of colour based on luminosity or brightness of colour rather than hue. A colour aesthetic of maximum intensity, using complementary hues in the Western tradition, may correspond to the "liveliness" of colour in some Aboriginal colour definitions. A study of the colour language of the Anbarra people showed that colour was conceptualised according to brightness or dullness rather than according to hue, suggesting that brilliance, intensity and "animation" of colour (sparkle or lustre) are significant distinctions.<sup>20</sup> While one cannot directly translate these results to Riley's work (they derive from a study of another Aboriginal people and language), maximum intensity of colour is one of the outstanding features of his work. Riley not only uses complementary contrasts of hue (yellowish green against violet pink, red against blue-green, yellow against blue – all true visual complementaries), he also delights in contrast of tone (brilliant white against deep blue or greenish black) and in shimmering effects obtained through the use of dots or series of regular brush strokes against a contrasting ground.

This love of brightness is particularly seen in Riley's extensive use of colour complementaries. Contrasting colours, when juxtaposed, intensify each other's hue and seem to create a luminous energy flow at the points or borders where they meet. In *Ngak Ngak, Sea Eagle*, 1988 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra) Riley painted *Ngak Ngak* a bright green against a rose pink ground. When asked why, he replied "It should be white, I know that, but it looks better – more powerful – green".<sup>21</sup> The force of Riley's image

derives from the exultant contrast of complementary colours, the colour intensity symbolising Ngak Ngak's spiritual power.

Riley's technique of laying in a brilliantly coloured ground over the whole surface and then building the painting in layers also leads to rich and sonorous colour effects, as the underpainting gleams through the successive layers of paint. Here the Western artist who comes to mind is Matisse, who similarly exploits the splendour and power of contrasting hues, obtaining magnificent colour effects with astonishingly few colours. Like Matisse, Riley often allows the brilliant underpainting to remain visible, glimmering through successive layers of paint.

The effect of these whole ground colour underpinnings is best seen in a series of four large canvases painted in 1993 while Riley was artist-in-residence at Araluen. *Limmen Bight Country, the Story of Creation, 1993* (Private collection, Sydney) [fig. 6] is notable for its beautiful colour balance. Here the brighter colours resonate against an intense blue ground, or harmonise with it in a variety of subtle nuances of hue and tonal variations. The landscape is presented in a symmetrical, heraldic manner. The twin forms of Garimala, emerging from the waterhole which he created and in which he still lives, form an arch over the luminous form of Ngak Ngak, the land's guardian and Riley's personal ancestor spirit. Above, the red sun in the white cloud expresses the relationship between the sun (the artist) and his mother (the cloud).<sup>22</sup> In the centre below, Bulukbun's terrible punishment of the wrongdoing boys is depicted by his arching form over Beatrice Island. Riley's extensive association of red with images of spiritual power reinforces the supreme creative force of Garimala, the serpent-creator whose energy and dynamism created Riley's "mother-country"; his association of bright white with Ngak Ngak, the sea eagle, may symbolise the constancy of the spiritual relationship between the artist and his totem ancestor. The blue ground sets the colour motif for this magnificent painting, and linking all images together, presents time from the creation to the present as one unified whole. This use of a pervasive ground underpinning and gleaming through the "local" colours effectively expresses the all pervading spirituality of the land.



*Four Archers – Limmen Bight Country, 1993* (The Heritage Commission, Canberra) [cover], also painted at Araluen, shows Riley's most startling use of a coloured ground. The whole canvas was painted a vivid red, then overpainted with blue, green, yellow and white. Looking at this painting, dominated by intense red, one is reminded of Goethe's reaction to the terrifying power of red in a landscape viewed through coloured glass: "The red glass exhibits a bright landscape in so dreadful a hue as to inspire sentiments of awe."<sup>23</sup> Goethe had responded to the "intolerably powerful expression" of vermilion, writing that the "active side is here in its highest energy".<sup>24</sup> In this work which is both brilliant and sombre, I am also reminded of Goethe's analysis of adjacent colours: "Red and green with black appear dark and grave...."<sup>25</sup>

The ground of *Four Archers – Limmen Bight country* is a brilliantly pure and saturated carmine red which underlies the whole painting. The upper sky is overpainted by a complementary blue-green or turquoise, softened at its edges by white clouds lined with blue and blue-green; a colour repeated at the lower border where it provokes the most intense contrasts against the red landscape. Deep emerald green trees glow darkly against this brilliant background. Emerald green is also used for the image of Ngak Ngak on the left. Layers of greenish black and greys are used for the landforms, and, loosely brushed, allow the red ground to glow through. In the foreground, hills and trees are circled with fire as Riley "reserves" their edges to allow the red ground to react with maximum force.

Pure red is also used for the images of Garimala; reinforcing the energy and power that, through the red ground, suffuses the whole landscape. This intense red expresses the immense power of the spirit ancestors that created this land. Through colour, the dynamic forces at work in the narrative of creation are presented as an all pervasive spiritual power, still active in the landscape today.

*The Limmen Bight River – My Mother's Country, 1993* (Private collection) [fig. 7] evokes a quite different response. Whereas red has aggressive proximity and expansive force, blue is retiring, withdrawing into infinite depths. Here blue evokes the immensity of the sky and the sea

(Riley has married the two in the upper register of the painting) and draws us into infinity, into time immemorial. An intense cyan blue ground underpins the whole work, showing though the deeper ultramarine blue of the sea and river; glimpsed through the colours of the hills and plains, it suffuses the whole landscape with a cold, pure blue light. The forms of the landscape reinforce tranquillity. The static tapestry of layers and bands, the gentle undulations of river and hills are interrupted only by points of spiritual energy in the saturated red of Garimala, whose twin images frame the sea eagle, Ngak Ngak, and form the guardians of the sacred Shark's Liver Tree. This painting evokes calm, completion, the active energy of the creation itself now stilled, the creation completed. Through colour and formal organisation, this work invites contemplation.

Colour in Riley's work is indistinguishable from the landscape and the mythic events it symbolises. His art materialises through colour his faith in the ever-present spirit which pervades the landscape. His art speaks to us of a personal and a cosmic mythology united in their continuity through time. The brilliance of pure colour, the vibrant exultancy of contrast, the beauty of aesthetic harmony, all express the intensity of Riley's love for his "mother country". His paintings use the power and dynamism of colour to express the strength of his, and his people's, ongoing and integral connection with the land.

---

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> *Ginger Riley*, National Gallery of Victoria, 17 July – 22 September, 1997. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala is the first Aboriginal artist to be awarded a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria. The exhibition was curated by Judith Ryan, whose accompanying catalogue is an indispensable reference. Biographical information, iconography and the artist's statements quoted here are drawn from this source. See J. Ryan, *Ginger Riley*, [exhibition catalogue], Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 1997. The following paper is my personal response to the art of an outstanding colourist who is Aboriginal and deeply committed to the spiritual traditions of his country; except when quoting directly, it does not speak for the artist.

<sup>2</sup> Max Charlesworth, "The Religious Sources of Australian Aboriginal Art" in Rosemary Crumlin and Anthony Knight, *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality*, [exhibition catalogue] Collins Dove, Blackburn, Vic., 1991, p. 111. Charlesworth continues: "The Dreaming is not merely something in the past (though it is that) but something that is also contemporaneously active. In Christian theology God did not just create the world in the past: by his power he continually sustains it in being, from moment to moment. The Dreaming is like that: it is a living and present reality continually sustaining and energising plants, animals and human beings."

<sup>3</sup> See Crumlin and Knight, p. 142 for an historical interpretation of the myth of Bulukbun as

avenger. Writing of My Country 1988 (retitled Mara Country, Catalogue no. 9 in Ryan), Crumlin and Knight note that "it may be that the dragon who rises from the sea to kill people and the cave that contains the bones of 200 people refer to the numerous systematic massacres by the white invaders in the thirty years before the establishment of [the Roper River Mission Station] in 1908." See also Anthony Knight "Ngukurr", *ibid.*, p. 94, for a brief history of Ngukurr and the Roper River area - an area particularly marked by aggressive extermination policies on the part of white pastoralists. Knight cites L. Hercus, and P. Sutton, *This is what happened*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, pp. 10, 14. Judith Ryan describes Riley's artistic creation as "the transformation of his innermost spirituality and origins into art.... Riley stands alone in creating a vision of his "mother country" as a mythic space, a mindscape, an interconnected series of vibrant icons."

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, p. 13

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Ryan, p. 14. Riley used the phrase "my colour country" to distinguish his vision of his own country from that of Albert Namatjira's vision of his. (Riley as a teenager had observed Namatjira painting.) Judith Ryan notes that "Riley recalls that he saw Namatjira 'painting his colour country' but is strong to point out that he 'did not claim his colour country; just saw my colour country, was thinking, went back to Nutwood to paint'". Riley here emphasises the right to claim, and to paint, only one's own country.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 10. Riley likens his painting method to building up the country itself: "Always mother country - I see my country when I wake up, think what I am going to do - sometimes one colour, sometimes three. Same country - coming to one place, Limmen Bight - blue down, green, red, building up colours, keep building up country." Quoted in Ryan, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, *Landscape with Olive Trees*, 1889, Collection John Hay Whitney, New York.

<sup>10</sup> Crumlin and Knight, p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, tr. Charles Lock Eastlake, (1840), introd. D. B. Judd, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1970, pp. 304, 334.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. p. 276 and pp. 304 ff..

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311. "As the upper sky and distant mountains appear blue, so a blue surface seems to retire from us. But as we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances towards us, but because it draws us after it."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 307, 311. Goethe also analysed, p. 325, the effects of adjacent colours: "The colours of the active side [yellow, orange, red] placed next to black gain in energy, those of the passive side [blue, violet, purple] lose. The active conjoined with white and brightness lose in strength, the passive gain in cheerfulness. Red and green with black appear dark and grave, with white they appear gay."

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Angry Bulukbun, 1990, (Private collection, Newcastle, N.S.W.)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352. Goethe believed (p. 351) that colour could be used as a language.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Nochlin (ed.), *Impressionism and Post Impressionism, 1874 - 1904: Sources and Documents*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> See Van Gogh's letters on The Bedroom at Arles in H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1968, pp. 40-42.

<sup>19</sup> Most people understand complementaries in terms of pigment primaries and their opposite - red and green, blue and orange, yellow and violet. However, these complementaries are not quite accurate, and the maximum intensity of colour is achieved when true visual complementaries are juxtaposed; e.g., red and blue-green; blue and yellow; violet and yellow-green.

<sup>20</sup> R. Jones and B. Meehan, "Anbarra concept of colour" in *Australian Aboriginal Concepts*, ed. L. R. Hirst, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), Canberra 1978, Ch. 2, pp. 26 - 28, 35.

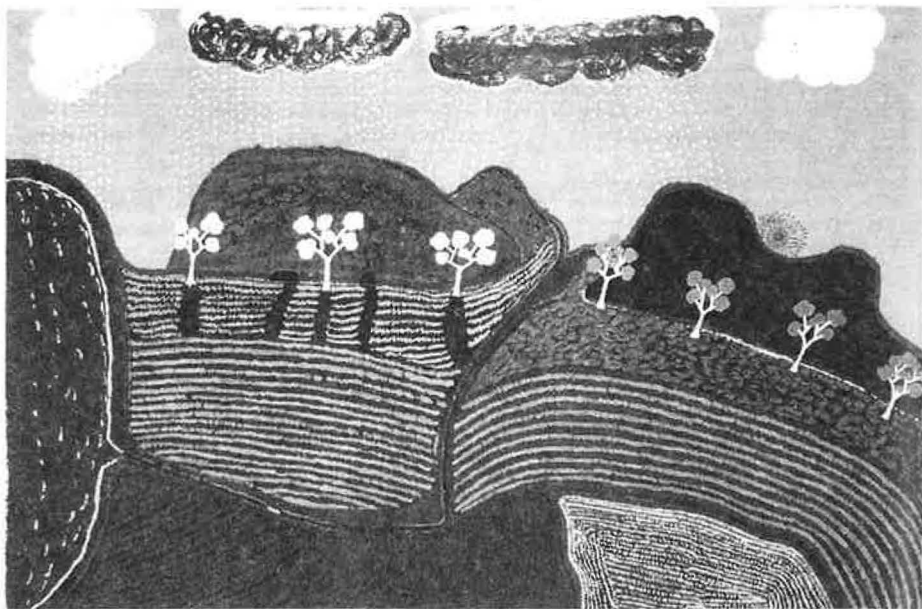
<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ryan, p. 20. Judith Ryan notes that Ngak Ngak plays the role of a sentinel or guardian, protecting the country. "Depicting Ngak Ngak is for Riley an act of homage, a means of honouring this protective spirit". See pp. 31, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Goethe, p. 315.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309. Goethe calls this colour by its abstract colour-name, "yellow-red", giving it as pigment equivalents, vermilion and minium.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.





5



6

