Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri

*Honey Ant ceremony*

1972

synthetic polymer paint on board

105cm high by 81 cm wide

In 1971, Tjampitjinpa Kaapa, schooled in the European style influenced by Alfred Namatjira and the Hermannsburg watercolourists, began painting traditional ceremonial imagery. He entered his work into a major art prize in Alice Springs – and became the first Aboriginal artist ever to win a contemporary art award. Papunya is an acrylic painting style heavy on detail, bringing together different peoples and languages.

*Honey Ant ceremony* is a example of this detailed style. The work is predominantly black, red, yellow and brown – at its centre an oval shape outlined in thick red. Around it is a sea of yellow with intricate black lines painted into a regular pattern, neat and similar, arches with ever-receding arches inside each other. The semi - circular arches form clusters and are in perspective, large at the top and bottom of the painting and smaller at centre, crowded in on one another, stacked together and as though receding into a horizon point.

At the centre- line of the work, either side of the large oval are two circles. Each is the same, a rich red circle intricately decorated with concentric lines of white dots within. At the work’s vertical edges, running the full height of the painting, down either side, are white vertical lines on a black background. They frame the central oval, forming a dull point at the middle - meeting red circles, covered in white dots.

Upon the white striped border, small oval shapes in a line, mostly white, four on each side and delicately patterned with lines and circles in red.

Most captivating of all is the large, central oval shape, taking up over half of the painting, yawning with patterning within. Three rosettes of stacked, splayed arches - half circles in red on white, form a line down the middle. The busy rosette shapes are separated by a sea of intricate curves, black lines onto white – each with smaller curves drawn inside.

The image is full, busy, delicately rendered in painstaking detail, stunning and mesmeric. Around the oval’s perimeter, within its red border, tools and ceremonial items, jewellery and weapons in black with white detailing.

This style of exquisite, intricate patterning is a hallmark of Papunya artists, precursors to ‘dot painting’. These detailed works are inspired by traditional desert stories, abstracted from their original meaning by the use of multiple patterns of dots, lines and circles.