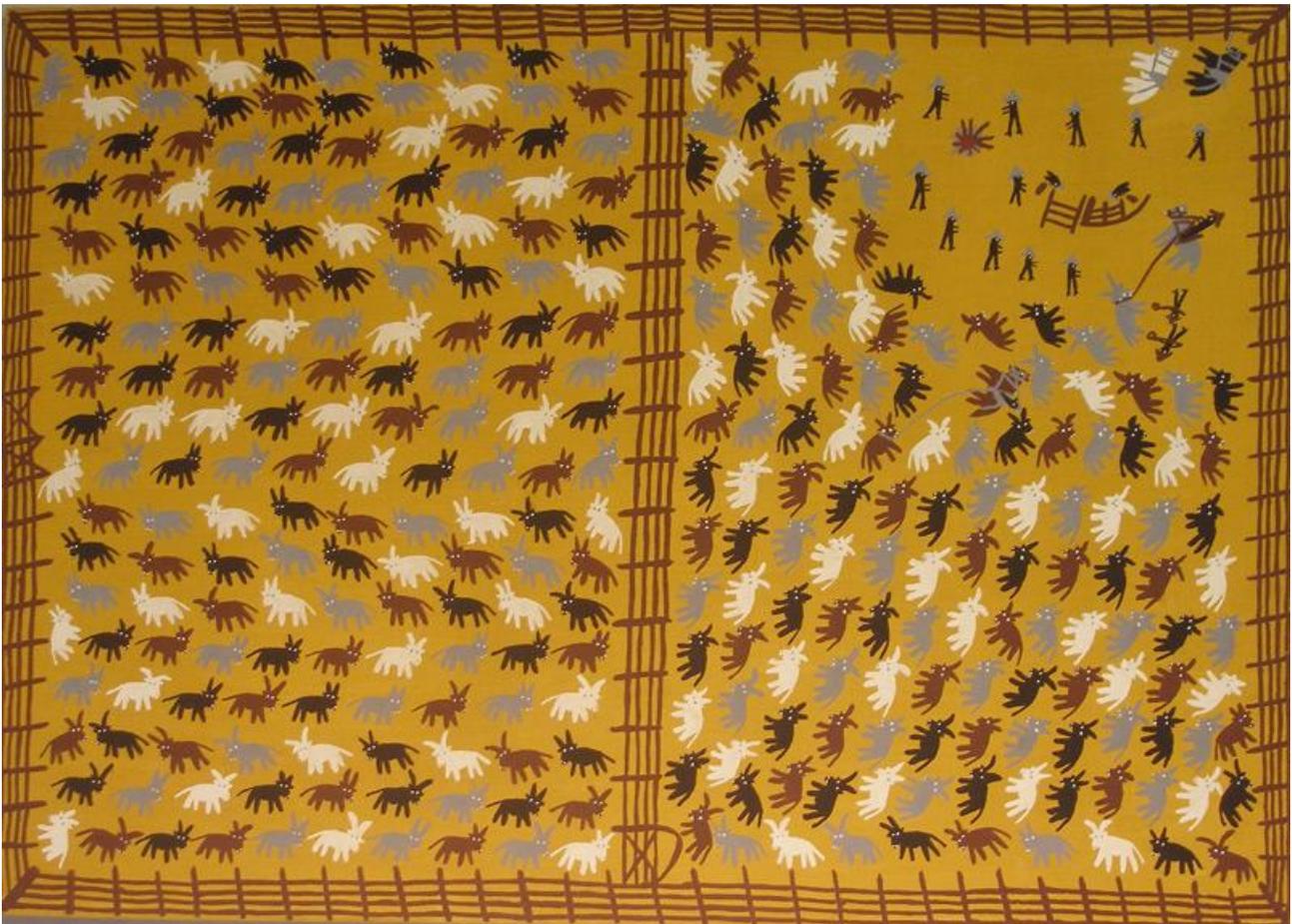


## THE ART OF STATION TIME

On 6 April 2016, **Darren Jorgensen**, Senior Lecturer in art history at the University of Western Australia, presented an illustrated talk to the Kimberley Society on the topic of art made by Aboriginal people about 'Station Time' in the Kimberley and across Australia. His summary of the talk follows.

In the Kimberley and elsewhere in Australia, indigenous people and others use the expression 'Station Time' to describe the era when Aboriginal people lived and worked on sheep and cattle stations. It comes after the 'Killing Time', a lawless period when some police and pastoralists employed the gun to 'clear' land of its occupants. There is also the 'Settling Down Time' that describes the transition between these two periods. Today, those who worked on cattle stations often speak fondly of Station Time, because the people who worked with livestock were able to put into practice their bush skills and knowledge of the land, particularly while they were on horseback.



Alan Griffiths, Ithjaroong - Rose's Yard 100 x 140 ochre on canvas. Courtesy of Waringarri Arts

While historians of Station Time argue over whether Aboriginal people were indentured labourers, serfs or slaves on stations, artists like [Alan Griffiths](#) memorialise the period with pictures of work. Griffiths grew up partly on Victoria River Downs Station in the Northern Territory, and was partly raised in the bush as his white complexion meant he was vulnerable to being taken away for adoption. A State Living Treasure, he paints in the studio of the [Waringarri Aboriginal Arts](#) in Kununurra, who then sell his works and manage his career.

This painting shows an intimacy with working on stations that is very different to the kind of paintings made by non-indigenous or "whitefella" artists. In non-indigenous Australian art, stations are generally depicted in the European tradition of the pastoral painting, often with sheep or cattle looking peaceful in landscapes dominated by gum trees. So it is that

Griffiths and artists like him are part of an alternative history of art about the pastoral industry in Australia, one that is about labour rather than nice scenery.



Mervyn Street, Droving, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 120cm. Courtesy of Mangkaja Arts

A second Kimberley artist who depicts station life is [Mervyn Street](#). In Street's work it is possible to see this tendency for Aboriginal artists to make 'action scenes' that are very different to paintings of the outback that typify the history of Australian art. Street, who paints in the studio of [Mangkaja Arts](#) in Fitzroy Crossing, and is also Chair of its board, says of Kimberley stockmen that 'They liked their work—worked for no money . . . I know it was hard work, but it was good fun, it was a good life.'

In both labour and art it is possible to say that Griffiths and Street point the way to a 'middle ground' that revisionist historians opened up in Australian history. For while Australian history was once generally told as a kind of conquest of both the country and Aboriginal people who live in it, this is not the only story that it is possible to tell. Work and more recently art open up spaces within which it has been possible for Aboriginal people to claim a kind of equality with non-indigenous people. As stockmen and artists, Aboriginal people have claimed moments of equality in Australian history which is largely the story of an unequal relationship between Aboriginal and non-indigenous people.

This history of artworks about Station Time can be traced back to drawings, carved woodwork, rock art and other artworks made by artists living in Station Time itself, on missions, stations and in the bush. [George Coolbul](#) was one such artist. While much of the public's interest in Aboriginal art is an interest in representations of ceremonies and other 'authentic' pre-invasion subjects, artists themselves have always been making pictures of their experience on cattle and sheep stations.