

## Token of grief for Christchurch and tears for Sri Lanka

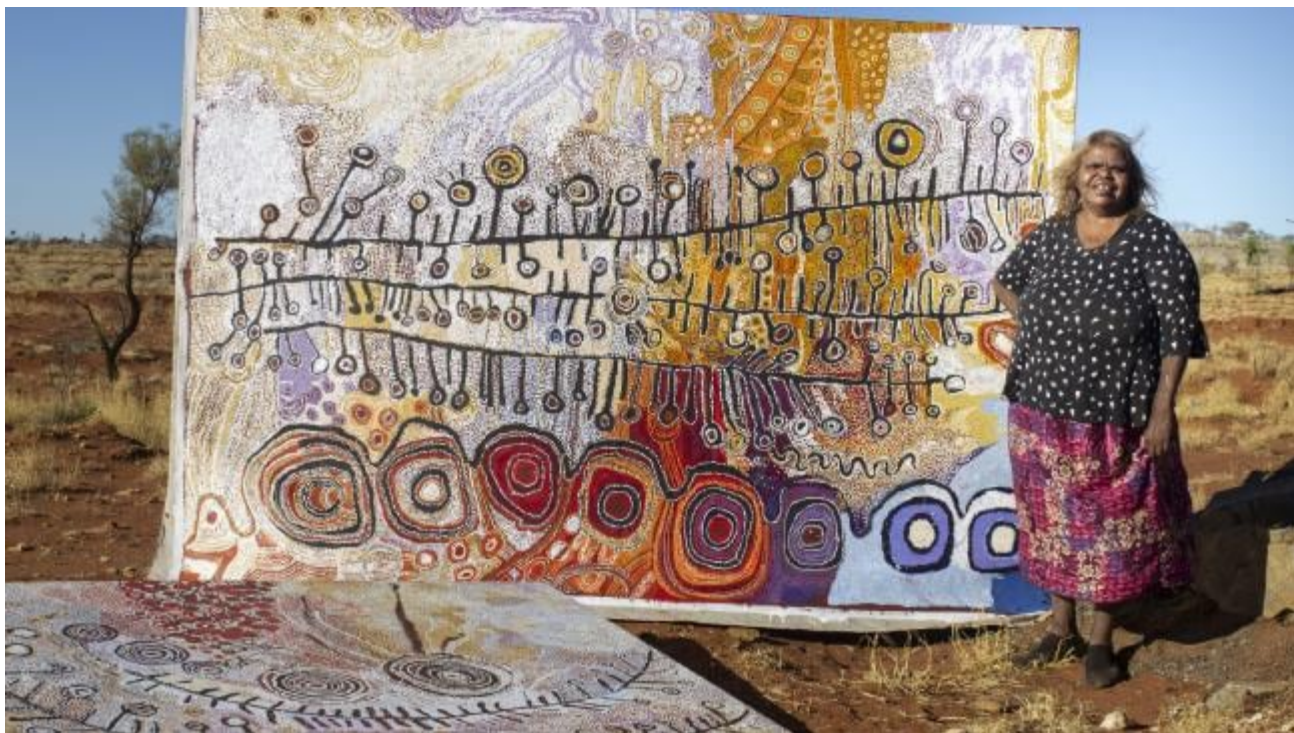
12:00AM April 24, 2019

[Amos Aikman](#)

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au › arts › visual-arts>

Northern Correspondent

Amos Aikman is the Northern Correspondent with The Australian, based in Darwin.



Indigenous leader and driver of the project Nyunmiti Burton with the two artworks in APY Lands.  
Pictures: Harry Saddler

When passing through the bush, sometimes you come across a windswept grave adorned with umpteen plastic flowers. It is a reminder that once, someone important died and a community rallied to comfort their family and memorialise their life.

And so it was with the Christchurch massacre, even far into the depths of South Australia's remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands.

Nyunmiti Burton was in Alice Springs when she saw the news. Religion has affected the bush, and Burton was horrified to see people killed while praying. "When I saw the pictures, I cried," Burton says.

"We are not family, but we are still the same ... different people with different languages, but the spirit is one."

Every Anangu knows what to do when tragedy strikes: someone gathers wood, another erects tarps; a sorry camp is quickly formed. In times past, painters have made canvases to fund funeral costs.

Women came from all over the region in a semi-spontaneous outpouring of sympathy co-ordinated at Burton's urging. Two of the eldest, Eadie Curtis and Wawiriya Burton, sketched an initial design. "We wanted to tell the people in New Zealand that we know you are sad inside, but you will be happy again," Burton says.

"That's why we painted the flowers, knowing in our hearts that joy will come."

Plastic flowers are prized at many Aboriginal funerals, offering a semi-permanence that, in the harsh climate, fresh ones cannot. Burton says the women were also inspired by images of cut flowers laid in New Zealand.

As the women worked, they talked about their families' ties to Afghan cameleers who traipsed through the heart of the continent soon after settlement. Nowadays, camels roam the outback, causing havoc at waterholes.

The women painted Utulkunpu or honey grevillea, a plant with glorious golden blossoms. They used a decorative design rather than Tjukurpa stories, feeling the latter would be inappropriate for canvas destined to go overseas.

One of two 2m x 3m canvases will go to Christchurch, to be donated to the local Muslim community. The other will go to Adelaide, by coincidence a Christchurch sister city.

Skye O'Meara, manager of the APY Art Centre Collective, says the artists' work came from "a very deep cultural place".

"I am always struck by how, amongst the stress, frustration and crises of APY social challenge — and in an environment of extreme disadvantage — Anangu stay connected and demonstrate the kind of leadership that sometimes eludes those operating from a far more privileged position," O'Meara says. "I received these great calls from women on the Monday (after the painting).

"Several of the women had picked up Ngintaka (lizard) on their way home — there was all this lucky hunting.

"The women seemed to agree that Country was looking after Anangu ... the Ngintaka was cooked that evening and shared with the women who worked on the canvas."

The South Australian government is expected to help the women convey the Christchurch canvas to New Zealand soon.

Following the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka at the weekend, the deeply Christian APY Lands community is once again in mourning.

A special service was held at Amata Church on Monday where the Anangu prayed for the victims and their families. "We were only just crying for New Zealand and now on the weekend, we are seeing more terrible pictures of families in pain," Burton says. "More people have been killed. Now we are crying praying for another mob for Sri Lanka, and the families of other people who have been killed for no reason."

