



# Short St. Gallery

## ALBERTA PURUNTATAMERI



**Born** 1947  
**Language Group** TIWI  
**Region** YAPALIKA, MELVILLE ISLAND

### BIOGRAPHY

When Florence and her sister Alberta Puruntatameri were 5 years old they were sent away from their Tiwi families to the convent school at Nguyu (today Wurrumiyanga), Bathurst Island, and boarded under instruction with the nuns until we were 18 years old. "There were a lot of little kids and we were all known as 'blackies'. Instead of the word girls they used the word 'blackies'. We had numbers at the convent for our clothes. Florence was 55 and Alberta 29. They wanted us to grow up like white people. To be Christian and live in a house. We used to go in the morning and milk the goat, with a little tin and at recess we'd drink the fresh milk. We had chores to do every day. We learned from conservative people and weren't allowed to speak in our language but behind their back we used to speak in our own language Tiwi." On Friday and Saturday they were allowed back to our parents at the front beach at Nguyu where they learned about their own Tiwi culture and on Sunday they had to go back to the convent. "As young girls, before we were born, we were promised as wives to older Tiwi men. Back in those days you had to marry the right skin, the right tribe because the tribe didn't want their land taken over. You have to marry from your country. This has all changed now. Our father Justin Puruntatameri had a proper old canoe, with a sail, and at holiday time we would go bush over to Munupi country. At that time Munupi had the buildings holding the stolen generation." When Alberta and Florence were asked what they would like to do after finishing school Alberta wrote "nurse" and Florence "teacher". "I used to go and do training for being a nurse in old Darwin hospital in 1965, in Katherine and then after my social diploma in health at Bachelor College the Health Department asked me to run the clinic. I was the manager for 10 years with no white nurses. During that time I delivered a lot of Tiwi children who are today



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running around as grown ups." Florence and Alberta's father Justin Puruntatameri, who used to work as a bricklayer in the mission days as well as on the mission boat delivering rations, encouraged the two sisters to paint their culture. "He was telling us story. We'd talk in Tiwi and when we used to say the wrong thing, he would correct us. You know that little hermit crab that walks on the beach? I paint dots with my comb for the hermit crabs holes and the circles I paint they are the water that the hermit crab goes in to feed." Today the two sisters Florence and Alberta come to Munupi Arts to spend some quiet time painting, recalling old stories and celebrating their culture with their family.