

Ian North

Big Story

Revisioning Australian Art 1971-2001*

1. Big Country/Story

Aboriginal art is yet to attract the crowds which flock through the Prado, yet El Greco's religious intensity is matched by it in a way which seems to fuse the theological ground of our being with the earth itself, in works which leapfrog over postconceptualism to stand Australia's 'provincialism problem' on its head. This, the big story of recent Australian and world art, began thirty years ago, in the artificially contrived community of Papunya, N.T., an Aboriginal settlement 250 kilometres west of Alice Springs, where Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Uta Uta Tjangala, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and, later, a host of other Aboriginal artists over a spreading network of remote art centres, produced art works of extraordinary power. The sheer size of Australia was a factor in the late colonisation of remote areas, and hence the continuing endurance of Aboriginal cultures. The big country has an art story to match, one undiminished by that recurrent Australian bugbear, comparisons with elsewhere.

Most major Australian art museums had begun collecting Aboriginal art systematically by around 1980, the year of Bernard Smith's seminal ABC radio lectures on race and culture, *The Spectre of Truganini*. The main turning point for the wider community in terms of accepting Aboriginal culture occurred in 1988, the bicentenary of white invasion, the year also that a group of artists from Ramingining formed *The Aboriginal Memorial*, an installation of hollow-log coffins now

occupying Gallery 1 at the National Gallery of Australia. In 1991 Terry Smith acknowledged Aboriginal art as ‘the most distinctive and celebrated form of Australian art of the 1980s.’ The art world has still to come to grips with its full implications, for it now seems clear, in 2001, that the Aboriginal art revolution is bound to take its place in history as a twentieth century art movement matching the significance and perhaps the consequences of cubism or surrealism.

The most common Australian reaction is still to see it as just another element in the mix, albeit somewhat left-field and left of centre, a self-contained topos: this allows one to cheer it on promoting urban cool on a business-as-usual basis. Political correctness, New Age religiosity, and, paradoxically, the belief that Aboriginal art is driven solely by the Western market all foster emphatic, exaggerated assertions of (traditional and contemporary traditional) Aboriginal art’s incommensurability with the West, the noble savage syndrome in contemporary dress. Such perspectives preclude detailed involvement with the reality of the phenomenon, which at once fully partakes of the Western art system, profoundly challenges its presumptions and points to a new paradigm for art world-wide.

This is not to suggest that Australian art should be coterminous with Aboriginal art, and even less that it can facilitate a return to first nature, as if to a womb. Nor is it to be disingenuous about cultural difference. Aboriginal art principally finds an audience in the West on the back of that for modernist abstraction and does not easily engage the Western viewer at the level of deep content, for all that it serves as a receptacle of spiritual yearnings. Yet this in turn is not to endorse strictures against over-praising Aboriginal art, for example out of political correctness masking unconscious hostility to difference. To such jeremiads—allowing that ninety per cent of Aboriginal art constitutes a cash-crop on a par with Western amateur art—the permanent displays at the state

museums and the National Gallery of Australia have long stood as sufficient refutation, capped by recent exhibitions such as *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000). The work of the best Indigenous artists, in its *de facto* optimism, joins that of non-Indigenous artists in pointing up a current lack of confidence within the dominant culture. Although this has compromised the development and direction of institutions including universities, art museums and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, it also plays back into the enthusiastic reception for Aboriginal culture, further expanding its reach into the non-Indigenous imagination.

Race and insecurity: these two factors sum up, in broad terms, why Australia is still not a republic (albeit a crowned republic in all but name), and there has been no apology (to Aboriginal people by the Government for historical injustices, the latter confusing inherited state with personal responsibility). These facts explain why the Centenary of Federation celebrations during 2001 have been a resounding flop in terms of nation building, anodyne community activities aside: there was nothing on the agenda to excite the national imagination. The broadcaster Stan Correy characterised the present political and social climate as echoing that of one hundred years ago, hence constituting ‘a strange moment in history’. He noted in 1901 that the new Australian Parliament passed the Immigration Restriction Bill, to be known as the White Australia policy, which was not fully put to rest until 1972, five years after Aboriginal people were accorded full citizenship. Now Australia is gripped by what Robert Manne has called ‘an exclusionary nationalism,’ in the wake of the *MV Tampa* asylum-seeker crisis, reanimating Australia’s recurring psychic need for great and powerful friends.

But the Aboriginal triumph also represents a warning against exaggerating the import of historical coincidences: parallels between

the uncertainties of the early 20th and the early 21st centuries only partly apply and even then do not necessarily offer explanations. Although the Howard Government has successfully dampened the nascent triumphalism felt during the Keating years—when the prospect of the Sydney Olympics and the new millennium seemed to point to the inevitable creation of an Australian Republic—there is now significant opposition to quasi-racist policies on refugees, in contradistinction to an almost universal belief in white supremacy early last century, when Australia's first loyalties lay with the British Empire. Against all the apparent historical odds, the sort of painting most likely to appear on the walls of boardrooms and political offices today is Aboriginal. Indigenous art, largely invisible to white eyes at the time of Federation, is the new symbolic landscape. Hans Heysen 100 years ago, Emily Kame Kngwarreye today: a turnaround for the history books.

2. Re-vision

Aboriginal art is occasioning new interpretations of Australian art history which cut across and qualify periodisation based on a distinction, in particular, between modernism and postmodernism and between representational and conceptually based work. The most powerful Aboriginal art today, whether traditional or Western in style, stems from a sense of trauma overcome, from culture expressed or recovered and necessarily modified, but ultimately traceable back to long periods of connection with particular tracts of land. It has the redemptive quality of a gift, more in the ultimate Derridean sense than in that employed by anthropologists: so, equally, does the most significant non-Indigenous contemporary art, which similarly springs in varying degrees from a sense of rupture and a desire for an internal reconciliation.

Contemporary traditional Aboriginal art, in particular, is lending landscape art a new charge, dismissed as W.J.T. Mitchell's 'dreamwork

of imperialism' in the decades of modernism, postmodernism and their subsequent dispersal into multiple practices. The neo-romanticism of William Robinson or the performative romanticism of Mandy Martin are cases in point, encouraging a fresh look at earlier generations, including John Olsen, Ian Fairweather and Sidney Nolan. Yet non-Indigenous art today is by no means to be identified simply with a landscape revival, still less that it should manifest Aboriginal forms or colours, or to sample the latter as if for World Music: Paul Taylor, the founding editor of *Art & Text*, warned artists off such an approach in 1983. The influence of Aboriginal art need have nothing to with stylistic prescriptions, for example the use of Aboriginal imagery, dotting, or the use of ochres. Work so affected tends towards tedium, the shimmering work of Tim Johnson, who had worked collaboratively with Western Desert artists, constituting a rule-proving exception. The sort of obvious hybridity sometimes tricked up for exhibitions like the Asia-Pacific Triennales is not relevant: what is important is a generative cast of mind encompassing the local particulars and the broader generalities of one's place on the globe.

Such an attitude can have a particular cast in Australia. I have elsewhere used the term 'starAboriginality' to indicate the existence of a new cultural condition in this country (in C. Green [ed.], *Postcolonial + Art: Where Now*, Sydney, Artspace, 2001). The word both honours the ongoing Aboriginal resurgence and acknowledges a deep acceptance of its history, presence and being on the part of non-Indigenous Australians, in ways beyond the 'white aboriginalism' of the interwar period, or as exemplified in the work of key artists like Margaret Preston or (later) Tony Tuckson. A principle driver of the term is Indigenous art across its entire spectrum. This most obviously embraces contemporary traditional work, by senior artists from remote areas, like Yupinya ('Eubena') Nampitjin (Balgo Hills, W.A.), Kathleen Petyarre or Emily Kame Kngwarreye (both from Utopia, N.T), for

whom first contact with Europeans occurred during their lifetime. 'Aboriginal art' similarly signals work with a more oblique connection with the land, as with that by Ian Abdulla, Ginger Riley or Judy Watson; which addresses two cultures politically, as in the work of Gordon Bennett and Richard Bell; or which consciously partakes of the international art scene, as with Tracey Moffatt. If the linking factor is trauma, Aboriginal art is not an homogenous field, still less one separated from the non-Indigenous art and its infrastructure. There are vast differences between the work of Yupinya and Moffatt, while the exhibition *Beyond the Pale*, curated by Brenda L. Croft (Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000) might have rendered redundant further contemporary 'Indigenous-only' exhibitions, given the possibilities, now, of cultural interweaving.

It is noteworthy that the contemporary (conceptual, postmodern and beyond) era in Australian art is virtually synchronous with the Aboriginal art renaissance: the latter's trigger at Papunya in 1971 constitutes a much more significant signifier of the period's instigation than Christo and Jeanne Claude's *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, 1969*, once cited in this regard. On the one hand similarities between 1970s conceptualism (art as information) and Aboriginal art—in which the truth of the Dreaming stories concerned has precedence over aesthetics, the representation of appearances, or the identity of individual artists—is more pronounced than it might at first seem. On the other hand Aboriginal art typically conceals as much as it reveals, its secret-sacred intent and connection to the land distinguishing it from the fag-end of modernist abstraction. These factors, while not forgetting the contingencies of artists' supplies or white advisers' influence, determine and animate its aesthetic power. In this light it would seem appropriate to emphasise the landscape/aesthetic elements of *Wrapped Coast*, as much as its conceptual emphasis, while recalculating its differences from late

‘formalist’ modernism as epitomised in *The Field* exhibition (National Gallery of Victoria, 1968).

Such moves are indicative of ways in which the Indigenous revolution might colour perceptions of Australian art over the past thirty odd years alone, as it passed the stations of, *inter alia*, conceptualism (with photography as a lingua franca), postmodernist appropriation, a foregrounding of postcolonial concerns and (typically per cyber media) explorations of the post-human. The experience of working as a student on *Wrapped Coast* helped tilt Imants Tillers an artistic career which has exemplified telling shifts in Australian art over the period in question. Tillers’ thesis for the University of Sydney, ‘Beginner’s Guide to Oil Painting’, 1972, contains an eco-political theme. This might have indicated an early disposition towards Aboriginal concerns, although ecological, Beuysian and counter-cultural philosophies were current at the time, informing the international earth art movement reflected, for example, in the 1973 Mildura *Sculpturscape*. Even so, the very idea of starAboriginality can prompt a mental web connecting but diverse practices.

Thus earth artists like Ross Grounds might shake hands with Jon Rhodes, whose magisterial photo-installation *Just Another Sunrise*, 1976, essayed the effects of bauxite mining on the Yolgnu people at Yirrkala, N.T., or with Wes Stacey, whose near contemporaneous photographic panoramas showed woodchipping in old-growth forests and Aboriginal sacred sites. (Their work is a reminder of periodic ‘in your face’ artistic intervention on racial discrimination, for example Tony Coleing’s *Plant an Australian Native Today*, 1976, a *succès de scandale* at the 1976 Adelaide Festival). Such art further connects not only to the conceptually oriented photography of, say, Hamish Fulton, but also to that of other visiting artists who took (quasi-photographic) sculptural prints off the land in the 1970s or 1980s (the Boyle Family,

Nikolaus Lang), or the desert walks and consequent gallery performances of Marina Abramovic and Ulay (e.g. *Gold found by the artists*, 1981). Such work also bears a relationship to certain art practices which, perhaps out of a sense of courtesy, paid little or no direct attention to Aboriginal art: the shafting metaphors of place produced by Rosalie Gascoigne come to mind, as do Antony Hamilton's variations on settler-culture bush myths. Performance art forms a complementary thread, from the work of environmentally oriented artists like Jill Orr, Bonita Ely and Kevin Mortensen in the 1970s (and later), through the resonantly complex, post-structural feminist presentations of Lyndal Jones (*The Prediction Pieces* and *From The Darwin Translations* in the 1980s and 1990s), to the work of Jennifer Turpin: this artist emerged in the 1990s from a performance background to construct, latterly with Michaelie Crawford, sophisticated sculptural installations in which water, a subject of increasing Australian concern, is an actor.

Mike Parr and Aleks Danko, with Tillers, are among artists who have maintained a significant practice over virtually the entire span of the past three decades. Parr made drawing-installations from 1981, in which, he stated, 'the mutilated white paper of the landscape equals the mutilated white body (the white body of infinite guilt/infinite purity...)', but his Wilhelm Reich-influenced performances had from the outset explored zones of deprivation, self-mutilation and catharsis which are even more suggestive of the Aboriginal experience despite obvious differences in artistic stance. Danko has long celebrated satirically the suburbia beloved of the current Prime Minister, while coming to excoriate the racism implicit in his policies (e.g. *Songs of Australia Vol 9 UH OH The Chinese are Coming [Takeaway Mix]*, 2000). Other artists explore the city as a cardinal point of traumatised glocality (to employ Paul Virilio's term) and thus as an essential reference point for starAboriginality. Jon Cattapan's pictures seem to

reveal both the physical and psychic structures of particular cities and the virtual global superpolis; Robert Boynes authoritatively renders cities as brutalising nexi of free-flowing capital; and Denis del Favero's photo-installations suggest surveillance, sharpening the impact of trauma on memory. Little wonder, then, that Bill Henson finds it appropriate to depict Australian youth as trashed angels on the fringes of cities and society in lustrous, penumbrous photographs: their plight is not dissimilar to that of Aboriginal petrol sniffers in remote communities.

The effect of globalism in the afterwash of colonisation—postcolonialism, in a word—has emerged ever more strongly as a theme since the mid 1980s, explored for example in the intricately formed and brilliantly pointed work of Narelle Jubelin and Fiona Hall, or, in a meditative, sonorous register, that of Bea Maddock. The theme also reaches a fine pitch of conceptual focus and artefactual skill in the collaborative painting and photography of Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, for instance in crepuscular images of a cultural icon, Sydney Harbour, mediated with harbour glimpses from the European imaginary as represented by Claude Lorrain (e.g. *In Tropic Landscape*, 2000). Ian Burn, a conceptual artist in the 1960s who became an influential art writer, also ventured combinations of ideas and poetry in his *Value Added Landscapes*, 1992-93. The work of all these non-Indigenous artists is acutely informed by an awareness of the Aboriginal culture and an ensuing sense of settler-culture discomfort.

The situation of Hossein Valamanesh, who made his first Australian painting at Papunya in 1974 after emigrating from Iran the year before, is instructive in this context. This artist has periodically included Aboriginality as a metaphorical presence in his personal, diasporic narratives as well as collaborations with Angela Valamanesh or Paul Carter, whose elegant writings on the way space becomes humanised

could be seen as fleshing out starAboriginality. The diverse origins of Valamanesh's work deny essentialism, just as his insistence on being recognised as an Australian before his Iranian qualities are acknowledged in daily transactions is a reminder that all sides are players in the formation of social identity, that Australian artists of Anglo-Celtic origin are as imbricated as any in the art scene nationally and internationally.

Tillers' contentious quotation of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra or Johnny Warrangula Tjupurrula's work in the mid 1980s (along with that, *inter alia*, of Shusaku Arakawa, Sigmar Polke and Colin McCahon) also had everything to do with their positioning, and his, within the global visual arts world. Such anxieties, not so incidentally, formed the satirised subject of painted compendia by Juan Davila: his *Fable of Australian Painting*, 1982-83, harked back to Heysen in a melancholy roll-call of artists as agents of commodification. In 1984 Tillers vigorously eschewed cultural convergence in his essay 'In Perpetual Mourning', advocating that non-Indigenous artists create 'strong urban-based art, oriented towards mimicry and deconstruction of the codes and signs of consumerism'. Since moving from Sydney in 1996 to live in a country town, the artist has come to consider an art of 'directly positive value', finding affinity with the land and, by extension, Aboriginal culture, while continuing to map references within the international realms of art and ideas. Some of his recent works, like *Caja Negra*, 2001, incorporate Aboriginal 'airport art' canvas boards thus seamlessly joining his 'Book of Power,' and he plans collaborative work with Michael Nelson.

A similar straw in the wind is to be found in Andrew Sayers's book *Australian Art*, 2001, the first general history seriously to attempt interweaving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous strands of art history. As recently as thirty years ago such surveys commonly failed to

mention Aboriginal art. Sayers nonetheless asserts that an ‘ontological gap’ lies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art, a gulf at the core of two cultures. In the same breath that he identifies ‘two stories’ in Australian art he also talks of one story and a thousand. There are two questions here: how can we resolve this understandable indecision; and how should artists practising today be seen in terms of a paradigm for art beyond the Australian context? These questions resolve into a third: how might convergence—as a long-term proposition beyond interdependency and monological assertions—actually *work*?

3. Beyond the Far Cultural

Postmodernist conceptions of the ‘far-cultural’ fell short of genuine equilateralism: the very term, as deployed and commented upon by G. Roger Denson, enshrines an alienating sense of difference, the idea of viewing others from a ‘falsely elevated promontory’ of Western superiority.

Attitudes towards cultural difference broadly divide into those in which incommensurability is key and those that assert a fundamental unity, while acknowledging historically and socially necessary diversity. Multiculturalism is an example of the latter. The concept of incommensurability leads to stereotyping, the idea that all peoples are reducible to culture, ethnicity or even race: it also encourages the idea that Aboriginal culture is more foundational than others, hence rendering them in some sense secondary, or second rate. Arguing against this is in no way to deny, for example, the importance of land rights to Aboriginal cultural survival or the particular needs of first peoples generally. The histories and requirements of all cultures must be considered, and ‘interchange’, ‘interweaving’ or ‘confluence’ will be more comfortable terms than convergence for many. At the same

time it seems important that binaries not be perpetuated beyond whatever is necessary for cultural and psychic security.

Examples of the ‘incommensurability’ syndrome are legion, and need not be laboured. The proposition that contemporary traditional Aboriginal art is purely for the West is a symptom, a consequence of too completely conflating markets with motives. When Kathleen Petyarre gets lost in her work, she is that the creature whose lessons she is imparting, an *arnkerth*, a thorny devil lizard. Research by Christine Nicholls at the remote community of Lajamanu, N.T. from the mid 1980s shows that an expectation of inter-communication with the West was a consistent reason for painting, in parallel with the lessons of Papunya’s history.

Recent bio-evolutionary and psychiatric theories come together to suggest that common ground between art’s myriad forms and stories world-wide may be again found through aesthetics, an ‘anachronistic embarrassment’ to Fredric Jameson as to many in the field of cultural studies, and an optional extra for philosophers like Donald Brook, an important influence on the development of conceptual art in Australia. Aesthetics offers a vehicle of transcultural transmission according to the degree to which you can find bio-evolutionary evidence for universal aesthetic phenomena and mythic structures—the writings of the writings of E. O. Wilson or John D. Barrow are germane. These one might conjoin with contemporary psychiatric theory as developed, for example, by Russell Meares, whereby empathic communication of one’s dreamings, one side of an internal dialogue which gives one a sense of identity, can create a sense of intimacy even with strangers—and by extension, I want to say, other cultures. A way thus opens up, as Charles Jencks has recently noted, between the position of objectivists who believe in beauty ‘out there’, and relativists who think it is only in the eye of the beholder. As a consequence neither evolutionary

psychologists and aesthetes on the one hand, nor cultural studies relativists on the other, have final sway: one is free to enter cultural interzones.

Multicultural and indigenous art movements continue to leave their formerly tolerated or execrated ghettos to help create a new sense of global equilateralism in art exchanges today, even if multiculturalism is in temporary, post terror eclipse. The opening of the non-Indigenous mind to Aboriginal culture over recent decades is in itself a noteworthy symptom of the new situation. StarAboriginality, in other words, is directly constitutive of this new worldwide paradigm for art. As with prior breaks in Western art, this one is deeply associated with the infusion of ‘foreign influence,’ but this time with an unprecedented level of interflow and mutual respect. This, one hopes, will prevent a repeat of the modernist attitude towards non-Western art, whereby ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ art was a refreshing tributary from a more simple cultural ‘past’ into the mainstream of a supposedly universal modernism.

It is worth underlining that the new circumstance—at its most idealistic and hopeful level—is indeed global, not merely Western. The idea of the far-cultural is certainly redundant in a world which, as CNN vividly reminds us, we are one as never before. In the end individual cultures must segue into a global culture and form, many lifetimes away, a world government. Kevin Murray has suggested that humanity is developing a ‘hive mind’, with artists in the role of beekeepers. Multiculturalism—essential now—will slowly become redundant in this context, while attempts to revitalise national cultures within globalisation are doomed to Disneyfication.

Aboriginal art, then, would appear to have vaulted from the straightened idealism of quasi-modernist art to the realm of the post-human, that is,

to a world which repudiates modernist humanism. It is also at a tangent to the post-human, being aesthetic enough to communicate widely, and because it is oblivious, on the level of content, to the realm—as tellingly probed by artists like Patricia Piccinini, Stelarc or Linda Dement—of AI, artefacts and cyborgs. These are projected as ‘second nature’ vehicles for survival for a ruined planet, whereas Aboriginal art takes us back to the very conditions of material survival, to a consideration, after all, of first nature, even as it participates in the global economic and cultural economy. Indigenous art is both within and beyond Australian art and the international mainstream as they have been conceived. Its importance lies in its transfigurative contributions to both, through exchanges which bring out the importance of all participants, all cultures.

To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, Aboriginal art has the aura and intensity of great religious art, and the second order aura of the prestige accruing thereto: it is at once vividly close-up, and remote, intimating both ecstasy and yet earthly embodiment. It is our empathic recognition of these dual qualities which allows us to nominate it as significantly contributing to a new realm of art, along with all art fostering generative, cross-cultural intersubjectivity: the expanded field of Australian art offers significant examples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. If this sounds utopian in its assumption of global communication, at least we might see that fundamentalism of any stripe and the new global paradigm are at opposite ends of the scale.

END

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