

## On Viewing Imants Tillers' *Terra nullius*

Early January 2020: for many in Australia, the time of unwelcome affirmation that our unique, life-created, living blue-green planet had shifted into a new and dangerous epoch - the Anthropocene.

Imants Tillers stood alone in the leafy green Cooma garden of his home, *Blairgowrie* - hitherto moist and sheltered in a safe, private hollow on the edge of town, but now surrounded by tinder-dry native bush and pine trees. His family were away, and nearby giant bushfires in forests and national parks, from Canberra to the Victorian border, circled the town. For weeks thick smoke had hung in the air, but now another crisis moment had come, as all available volunteer fire-fighters had been called out. One wind-shift, and the Adaminaby fire in the *Kosciusko National Park* to the north-west could roar down the Murrumbidgee corridor of drought-desiccated forest and explosively burst into and through the town. Tillers felt defenceless and alone and could only watch and hope.

It was a powerful moment that inevitably would trigger a fresh inscription on the palimpsest of a fertile artistic mind.

That same January afternoon, forty kilometres to the south-west, my family and I stood beside fire trucks in readiness to defend our farm and homes. All sheep were locked in bare yards as ash, burnt leaves and bark rained down. Then the sky turned a shocking black, until suddenly, and for fifteen degrees above the entire surrounding horizon, a blood-red crimson emerged. We felt we were surrounded by fire until, on dusk, it all became black again.

At the same time, sixty kilometres to the east and down the coastal escarpment, a friend of mine - a senior lawman and first-nation Ngarigo elder - inspected the ruins of his forest country in the wake of the deadly Cobargo fire. For decades he had rescued and nurtured a colony of koalas. This day, on discovering forty charred carcasses, he sat on a log and cried, and cried, and cried: because, what else did he have left to lose?

Eight months later Imants Tillers invited me to *Blairgowrie* and his stunning, classical-style studio to see his new artwork, *Terra nullius* - born out of the bushfires.

Unexpectedly, yet perhaps predictably in retrospect, I experienced a strong visceral reaction as I was prompted to re-live that black and crimson moment in January.

Why did *Terra nullius* impact me so strongly?

I admire much of Tillers' oeuvre, though not fully understanding some of the history and intellectual background of the body of his work. His canvasboard modular system, begun in the early 1980s, makes practical, artistic, and intellectual sense. His appropriation strategy likewise I understand, for, as Graham Coulter-Smith explained, it is 'highly original, and embedded in a serious deconstructive authorial appropriation approach that was combined with self-reflexivity and paradox.' As a writer, I could understand this because, in arts and letters and in each of our own particular milieus, do we not all rest on the shoulders of our predecessors and peers, however subconscious this may be?

I also admire Tillers' quiet intellectual insurgency, for I see his art as an intriguing yet successful mix of the aesthetic and the intellectual. And in this he has stuck true to his core principles, laid down so clearly in his 1973 Sydney University Honours thesis (*The Beginners' Guide to Oil Painting*), where he states: 'As a society our model of reality is one based on economics - the world is seen as a commodity, not as a series of interrelationships which incorporate physical and biological processes.'

Like any informed and creative artist, windmills are there to be tilted at; preconceptions, historical laziness, power and cultural paradigms to be challenged. As Coulter-Smith so aptly analyses, Tillers has a bias towards art that undermines and challenges the traditional primacy of the artist-creator in favour of processes and systems - and systems that can self-organize themselves: another intersection point for Tillers and I.

And I like the aesthetic break-out in Tillers' art. We both enjoy landscape: me as a farmer-ecologist, he (as I see it) as an open-minded artist soaking in sensory impact for artistic translation. Tillers can paint landscape and nature gorgeously - evident in the *Nature Speaks* series; in his *Monaro* studies; in the luscious blue cornflowers in *The Poet of the Blue Flower* 2013, and in his 2020 *Flower Meadow*, based on a black-and-white photo from around 1900 taken by the Norwegian painter Harald Sohlberg: an organically lovely composition that captures the earthy texture of close-up grass stems in combination with subtle pastel colours emerging unexpectedly but sparsely, like blood seeping through canvas.

All the above elements are brought to bear in *Terra nullius*, and the aesthetic in the evocative depiction of the licking yellow flames, the pinks, crimsons and blended yellow-reds, the black overhead, the giant swirl of the whole fire, and the insertion of place names and the nomenclature of each fire-front across the Monaro region.

For those of us who have fought and experienced fires, Tillers' insertion of serendipitous thought and spoken word reinforces the visual impact of flames and smoke. This helps inject emotion into the work. Many of these words impacted the conscious and sub-conscious at the time because of the local ABC radio coverage,

warnings, interviews, and live reporting – some of which saved lives. Examples of words encapsulating thought, reaction, panic, anguish, horror, include: *Lord thine earth is burning* (repeated); *being terrified*; *seized with horror*; *do not leave me*; *obliterated*; *God forsaken*; *fire ground*; *pyrocumulous*; *keeping vigil*, and many similar.

For me, Imants Tillers, through the use of his established metier – of appropriation, canvasboard panels, and artistic aesthetic – has been able to bring alive, rekindle and trigger the very emotions and perceptions of those of us living through that apocalyptic time.

Deeper philosophical issues and recurring motifs also appear in *Terra nullius*. Bottom left is a motif resembling a charred tombstone and the words 'A land belonging to no-one' (i.e. *Terra nullius*) – and repeated; 'The land is burning'; 'The earth is utterly broken'; 'life is frightened'. And above the central panels of fire: is that black arch at the top, an Auschwitz-like gas-oven motif?

But finally, I return to 'Tillers' and my interest in, and appreciation of, the increasingly understood nature of complex adaptive systems and the role of self-organization. Since Humboldt, Darwin, some of the Romantics like Goethe, and later Jan Smuts, creative thinkers have intuitively grasped how nature and our earth and its systems work holistically. From his eclectic reading, Tillers very early (in the 1970s) intuitively saw the significance of the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy and landscape designer and planner Ian McHarg, who clearly influenced his holistic systems aesthetics. Implicit in this appears to be a reaction against modern scientific reductionism and ideas like closed systems and entropy (which can lead to collapse). Instead, there is an embracement of the opposite: of the creative potential of negentropy and the capacity of biological systems to evolve greater complexity and thus increase levels of organization in ever more complex, self-organizing systems. Thus, through engendering greater complexity and greater creativity, Tillers appears to be enabling self-organization in his art.

Since the computer age and a deeper understanding of hard and then soft systems theory, and thus an apprehension of the twelve or more components of complex adaptive systems, today we better understand the key properties of self-organization and the elements these processes are built on. Key are emergent properties that lie ready, albeit haphazardly, within such systems. As Coulter-Smith aptly sums it: 'Tillers' dedication to the supersession of the artist-creator by self-organizing systems is an enduring and increasingly elaborated facet of his work.' As Tillers himself describes, his oeuvre is thus a 'sophisticated scientific aesthetic' that grows and feeds and reflects and borrows on itself 'like a self-organizing system.'

This deep driver of complex adaptive systems also resonates with 'Chaos' and 'Complexity' theory. And that returns me to why *Terra nullius* triggered in me such a visceral reaction. This is because the central panels of flame and chaos, and the

repeated and emotionally-charged words and thoughts of people in the face of large, immanent events beyond our normal lived reality, don't just combine to build a re-lived experience and trigger past memories. In addition, for me there is paradoxically the promise of hope beyond conflagration. This is because many Australian ecological and natural systems are adapted to fire; emergent properties lie within and enable regeneration via often unanticipated self-organizing processes. It has ever been thus on this fiery continent.

The ecological understanding behind recent 'Resilience' thinking in ecology describes that, following stages of maturity and the lock-up of energy, nutrients and material in ecosystems, there is usually a phase of 'Release' via serendipitous natural events. In the case of fire, and in complex adaptive systems evolved to this, following the initial entropy, this 'Release' leads to re-birth and regeneration via self-organizing processes. So, in this painting I also see the implicit message of hope and renewal.

Predictably, however, there is a tension here. For me, the 2019-20 fires that Tillers has so evocatively captured carry an even deeper and indeed more disturbing warning. Tillers touches on this in his *Nature Speaks* series (1998-present), where, in tilting at the Western anthropocentric view of our planet, he alludes to the implied political and social issues embedded in late capitalist culture.

One of our most prescient and courageous public intellectuals, Clive Hamilton, talks about a 'Defiant Earth' fighting back. Tillers, in *Terra nullius*, has powerfully captured a cut-through moment in time when, for many of us, the reality hit home that we humans have pushed our planet's nine self-organizing mega-systems into a new, dangerous and unpredictable epoch. In time, this could even end the domination of our species, leaving Earth as *Terra nullius* once more: un-owned by humans and left to self-organize herself back to health, but shed of the alleged 'doubly wise' species.

Charles Massy, Regenerative Farmer, 2020

### Sources

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