

Imants Tillers: Terra nullius

Terra nullius 2020

synthetic polymer paint, gouache on 288 canvasboards

nos. 110633-110920

304.8 x 853.4 cm

Terra Nullius 2020 is a response to the 18 fires burning around Cooma in January 2020 (including the Good Good Fire, The Bucktown Fire, and the Rolling Ground Fire, which are named in the painting) and it maps the localities that were affected in the immediate vicinity of Cooma and of our home 'Blairgowrie' at the centre of my experience and therefore of my painting. At this moment, Heidegger's concept of "The Emergency of Being" was not something abstract but became our lived experience and that of many other Australians.

The painting draws on several visual sources including a work by the Italian Transavantgarde artist Enzo Cucchi, a colleague, and recently a friend, *A Painting of Precious Fires*, 1983. It also quotes from some of the most important artists of the 20th Century, including Joseph Beuys, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, Vija Celmins and Colin McCahon.

Terra Nullius consists of 288 canvasboard panels which are numbered from 110633 - 110920. I began working on canvasboard panels in late 1981 and decided to number them consecutively from 1 to infinity - 'a preposterous idea'. An idea inspired by the great French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé who once declared that "everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book". Thus, all my canvasboards together form a single, ever-evolving work which I have called *The Book of Power*.

Since 1981 I have become a bibliophile who collects books for images and words to use in my work - preferring to store them as a slightly chaotic 'mountain of books' stacked on top of each other rather than organised on shelves, which is more normal. Also, the texts I have collected over four decades include words and phrases from poets, writers and philosophers such as Novalis, Michael Dransfield, π O, Thomas Bernhard, Martin Heidegger, Stéphane Mallarmé, Giorgio de Chirico and others, but also texts from both the Bible and Buddha. These have been made into paper stencils - templates that I can use and reuse which sit on several chairs in the studio.

My painting *Terra Nullius* includes a number of fragments of text from these sources but importantly it also quotes from Captain James Cook's journal on sighting Australian shores for the first time in 1770 when he declared it to be "Terra Nullius" - "a land belonging to no one" - that is no one civilized according to him - and therefore claimed for England. Cook then added this description: "nothing but scrub, sometimes sand, sometimes stone" and he must have thought: where am I?

Terra Nullius is a meditation on ‘chance’ and ‘destiny’ - ‘belief’, ‘faith’, ‘truth’, ‘doubt’ and ‘untruth’. A key element is the quotation of Joseph Beuys’ *Door* 1954-6, a work which is widely regarded as the beginning of his serious oeuvre. It is a burnt wooden door to which he added a heron skull and rabbit ears. *Door* allowed Beuys to overcome his personal ‘Emergency of Being’ and pave the way towards a new concept of art “that includes everything but without excluding the traditional activity of the artist by this expansion. My concept of art in no way leads to the conclusion that it is no longer possible to make art. On the contrary: the conclusion is that art is indispensable. But one must arrive at seriously expanded concepts concerning art.”

Imants Tillers, 2020