

A Critical Examination of the Artists' Current Work from an International Perspective

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In the new work of Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth and Mike Parr, American audiences will, I think, be struck both by their stylistic affinities to international tendencies and by their strength and originality. Unsworth and Parr have moved from body art into an expressionistic style of painting. The requirements of highly personal content have dictated their style but a number of important new painters from Germany, Italy and the United States share their concern with expressive immediacy, linking them all in a wider tendency. A similar transcontinental relation exists in the preoccupation of Tillers with predetermined images from the media. Certainly there are similarities to the work of Rauschenberg (in his manipulation of media images, the "unfocusing" to use John Cage's term) and to that of Johns in the way Tillers layers his images compositionally. Yet Tillers personalizes the highly impersonal influx of information in an intriguing and unique way of his own.

Imants Tillers

Imants Tillers composes his paintings entirely with images from magazines and books or occasionally from original works by other artists; none of the forms themselves (known as "received images" in communication theory) is original. In *Pataphysical Man*, for example, the main figure comes from a reproduction of a painting by de Chirico entitled *The Archaeologist* [fig. 26]. Tillers has also used drawings by Wilhelm Busch (the German cartoonist who created Max and Moritz), drawings by Malevich, figures from Australian Aboriginal rock paintings [fig. 27], illustrations from Carl Jung's book on alchemy and about fifty little drawings which he found in books of Latvian folktales and in a book called *The White Book (Balta Gramata)* by Janis Jaunsudrabins. In some works he has also used images from contemporary art, such as paintings by Cucchi (see Tillers, *Zeitgeist Painting*) or David Salle (see Tillers, *Nausea*).

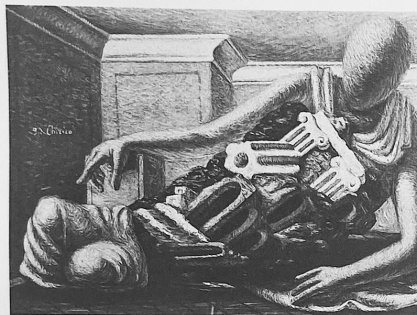


fig. 26 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Archaeologist*, 1926-27
oil on canvas. Private collection, Milan



fig. 27 Aboriginal cave painting at Quinkan

Tillers mechanically shrinks or enlarges images to the scale he wants for his composition and then, using a grid, he redraws them onto his canvases. He paints and draws everything on small canvas board units of uniform size (10" x 15"), then he assembles them into full-scale compositions. Although Tillers paints in an ordinary house where the ceiling height prevents him from fully assembling his larger paintings, working on them in sections suits his purposes well; it distances him from the overall image and lets him concentrate on the layering of details. As he works, he consecutively numbers every canvas board (by now over 2,000), and stacks them in tall piles. He regards the stacks as an acceptable alternative method of displaying these works (see Tillers, *Stacks*) because it further reinforces their systemic quality. "I can look at them in a stack," he told me, "and I feel detached from them."

Detachment is precisely what Tillers's art is all about. It has to do with the kind of alienation one feels experiencing something through the media. Working in Australia has made him acutely aware of his dependence on the media for his knowledge of world events and, although this dependence is universal in the later 20th century, it is perhaps more exaggerated in Australia than elsewhere. Tillers has developed this into a building block for his aesthetic. He treats the barrage of magazine photos, films and information in print as part of the undifferentiated substance of experience; it belongs to "nature" and "reality" as much as the trees in the suburbs of Sydney. "In Australia you are protected from the original," Tillers said.

So Tillers turns cultural isolation into a rich layer in the content of his work. This aesthetic transformation may be the logical outcome of his work on Christo's 1969

Sydney project, *Wrapped Coast* (John Kaldor's first Art Project). Whenever Christo encounters obstacles to his projects — whether they are court battles, public hearings or engineering problems — he incorporates them into the work of art and documents them meticulously. Although Tillers's work has no visual relation to Christo's and concerns chance more than causality (where the reverse is true of Christo), Tillers assimilates external events in a conceptually related way.

Tillers paints and repaints his boards, building up multiple levels of images. "When you look at one panel," he explained, "it has been violated by the painting over it; there is no attempt to integrate the drawing with the images painted on top." Implicitly, Tillers equates this accretion of images, one over the other (and the serial juxtaposition of fragments in the composition as a whole), with the random shower of information that we all experience daily. In his view, that cumulative implosion of images dominates contemporary life. His subject is not in a unified iconography but in multiplicity itself.

A number of artists on the current scene are interested in coming to terms with this phenomenon in their painting. A few avidly read Barthes or Chomsky, trying to apply highly intellectual theories of linguistics and semiotics to painting. Others attempt to treat style objectively, often dissociating it from conscious expressive meaning. In the work of David Salle, for example, the kitsch style accentuates the role of "style" in the perception of real events; his subject matter seems to be the language of painting. Even some of the new Expressionist work sweeping the art world today (Schnabel, Chia and Cucchi among them) has an oddly detached character, which suggests that the artists' inquiry has less to do with expressing his primitive unconscious than with examining the nature of style *per se*.

In Tillers's work, this theoretical side comes from a genuine effort to re-establish the immediacy of individual experience in the context of mass culture. Although the images are borrowed in *Pataphysical Man*, for example, the artist attempts to invest them with personal associations through the color and surface handling as well as the choice and arrangement of forms. In a number of recent works he has even begun painting with his hands — which gives him less control than using a brush — to heighten the expressive directness. He has also stencilled his hand or made handprints in various works — an intimate gesture that further asserts his presence in a situation over which he feels he has less and less control.

The little boy in the lower centre of *Pataphysical Man* comes from a detail of an illustration in *The White Book* [fig. 28]. Tillers himself is of Latvian background and the episodes of *The White Book* depict rural life in early 20th century Latvia. This was the world of his parents and Tillers said that he identified with the boy. And yet "it's a life style I've never known at all," Tillers pointed out, "it's alien and archaic." This sense of alienation, even from something to which one feels so intimately connected, is an underlying theme of Tillers's recent work. His description of the images to me as "slightly violent or oppressive," together with his feeling that the building up of images in successive layers on a single canvas board is a kind of "violation", suggests that he experiences the multiplicity of modern life as assaultive too.

The title of *Pataphysical Man* refers to the "pataphysics" of the poet Alfred Jarry, whose 1896 play *Ubu Roi* begins with the word "Merde" (shit). It is at least an interesting aside that the sets for the first performance of that proto-Dada work were a collaboration between Bonnard, Vuillard, Toulouse-Lautrec, Serusier, Ranson and



fig. 28 Detail of an illustration from page 89 of *The White Book* (*Balta Gramata*) by Janis Jaunsudrabinš

Jarry; and that after the performance they were painted out — a point that Tillers found very interesting. Jarry is the hero of alienation; Tillers has evoked Jarry's iconoclasm and his wish to retreat from the advance of civilization as themes for *Pataphysical Man*.

During the painting of *Twilight of the Idols*, a drop of paint which fell on the base-board of the wall under the piece accidentally produced a perfect spiral. The symbol of Jarry's pataphysics is the spiral and this gave Tillers the idea of referring to Jarry's pataphysics in the next painting. Tillers often exploits such free association both to elaborate the content of an individual work and to germinate the concepts for subsequent pieces. But he does not always rely on images as the vehicle for his associations. In *Settlement at Papunya* (a reference to the spot where in the early 1970s a now flourishing Aboriginal art movement in Western materials was initiated), Tillers applied a romantic background palette suggested by the pre-War works of Kandinsky, rather than employing an image from Kandinsky's paintings.