

Imants Tillers: As Soon as Tomorrow

When the sky is dark and raining burning bark, there is little for an artist to do but respond. For Imants Tillers, the result is a new series of work that expresses the rage of a man who is clearly saying that something needs to give.

The trigger for his new works began in 2019 when the world awoke to horrific images on the nightly news: the Notre-Dame de Paris, with its cornerstone laid by Pope Alexander III in 1193, was in flames. Having survived rioting Huguenots, the French Revolution, and Nazi incursions, the place where Napoleon married his Josephine and crowned himself as emperor was burning down.

The destruction left Tillers with the looming sense that something terrible was on the way, and then it came in waves – first Australia’s Black Summer fires, followed by the pandemic that engulfed the world before the flames were even out.

Tillers is gripped by the sense that what has been extinguished is the voice we most need to hear right now. It is the voice of philosophers, who in earlier times were revered and consulted, their views shaping the culture and direction of the world.

Contemporary visionaries are more likely to be shouted down by episodes of what Tillers calls “strident and chaotic opinion” - the voices of a few outspoken zealots dominating the national dialogue with their quick-clicking, clogging the arteries of the internet with their shouty fingers. These are the people always ready to claim moral outrage over this or that or him or her. They are the loudest neoliberalists, who believe the world isn’t *our* home, it isn’t the home of wildlife or wilderness, it is *their* home, to do with as they please. Anyone who disagrees can go hang.

It is this resurgence in anger and energy that fuels the centrepiece of Tillers’ 2021 exhibition, particularly in the work that bears the same name as the title of the exhibition: *As Soon as Tomorrow*.

The ideas that shape the work began to demand Tiller’s attention after his 2018 solo at the Latvian National Museum, *Journey to Nowhere*. That is *Ceļojums uz Nekurieni* in Latvian, the language Tillers spoke at home until began to go to school in the southern outskirts of Sydney. Back then, The Shire was a wild and bushy place, a place well apart from the European motherland of his parent’s heritage.

For the last two decades, Tillers and his family have lived in Cooma. Like so much of Australia, the Monaro suffered extreme fires over the long-drought ridden months of 2019--2020. The experience of witnessing the Monaro in flames reconnected Tillers to the grief and shock of Notre-Damme, only now the scale was scoped out on a whole new level. In a country well versed in the torment of fire, these fires were something else.

Australia spiralled into panic. And then our national mourning was eclipsed by Covid-19. So much so, that two years on, nothing much has changed. The towns that burned stand still in time, missing buildings like gaps in the teeth. Houses have not been replaced, and the hearts of too many good men have given out in despair – women too, but the impact particularly on older men, often elders, outsiders, people beyond the margins of the mainstream, who largely lived on their own, seem particularly impacted. It is these men

who survived the fires, but collapsed under the pressure of building a life all over again, in clothes dropped off at the gate.

Tillers' new work, *Terra Nullius*, is a fiery landscape of hell and hope, which references all that happened on those intensely hot firegrounds. The artist surrounds this series of numbered canvas boards with intense ignition points, swirled around a box of Redhead matches. The text proclaims an urgent decision to "flee, yes flee". And yet there is a glimmer of hope with the decisive statement "we have decided not to die." The words occupy the bottom right hand corner of the work as if they were balancing the feng-shui of surviving the Anthropocene with a bagua-grid that calls down the good chi to purify Australia's transgressions.

Before reaching any kind of karmic settlement, the viewer must face the fact that things are broken. At the centre of this narrative drawn out on canvas panel, sits the artist's home, Blairgowrie, where the artist is "keeping vigil".

His home and studio may very well have gone up in smoke along with 18,636,079 hectares of this country. The fire didn't distinguish between wildlife and farmer's herds. Bush, town, beach, farm or kerb-and-guttered suburbia – it didn't matter what or where or even how many times the fire returned, burning the air above the ground when there nothing else was left.

With his signature style, the text overlaid in *Terra nullius* states that it isn't just people or plants or animals or things or politicians or insurers that are frightened - *life* is frightened – it is "burning", it is "broken". It is downright "terrified".

The black summer fires sent many artists off to the studio to pack their artworks away. Lucy Culliton who lives nearby put her work onto a truck. Down on the coast, management at Bundanon - Arthur Boyd's famous Shoalhaven River estate, bequeathed to the nation in 1993 as a museum and artist's retreat - evacuated the Nolans, the Boyds and the Blackmans. In total, 3,800 works were rehoused at the height of the crisis, though there was no time to remove rare sketches by Picasso, Olsen or Nolan.

The threat of evacuation similarly presented Tillers with the complexity of moving his entire body of work. This is the work of a man who assisted Christo to wrap the shoreline at Sydney's Little Bay, who brings forward the tender sense of tragedy of the Latvian refugee, a man who knows that only gentle steps towards the future will secure a life for his newborn grandchild. But where does an artist take their work when so much of the place has burned?

Tillers' significant contribution to the canon of Australian contemporary art has graced the walls of important international exhibitions. His work *Pure Beauty* (1991–97) was the first artwork ever commissioned from the Powers bequest for the foyer for the launch of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art.

He straddles the extremes of world events of the past and the present, and this gives him a unique perspective from which to assess the terroir; to gain a fine appreciation for the Antipodean landscape, where he has lived, displaced in the diaspora; and to gauge what the rapidly changing local conditions are likely to produce. His wife, Jenny Slatyer remarks that the Monaro is already a region comparable to the hottest, driest places on

earth. To dry that even further, with intensive European-introduced burning and clearing practices is a clear path towards disaster. Local naturalist John Blay flared many warnings that the big fires were on their way.

As a man, Tillers believes it is not enough to merely *see* the unspeakable, he must *speak* of it. So he renders it in lettering, he draws it, he puts his hands in ink and paints it.

As an artist, he then adds this response to his collection of canvas board tiles that form his artworks. To *not* do this is to become complicit in a future that is well known, even though warnings never seem to halt the slew of atrocities.

Perhaps it is his Latvian connection to the pain of being silenced and overshadowed by ruling powers of *otherness* that allows Tillers to draw on the imagery of what we have *all* been through: Flood, fire, or worsening droughts, food and housing shortages. And then there are the transgressions of old, in the form of wars, invasions and behaviours that abandon the meaning of love and kindness, peace and acceptance, values at the heart of what it means to be a human being.

Tiller's depiction of the lie of *Terra nullius* speaks as much to the Black Summer fires as it does to the rekindling of stories of Australian origins and identity, and challenges to the colonial perspective. These narratives burn at our national psyche with a willingness to smoulder, spark and destroy; with a desire to tear it all down, in search of something compassionate, inclusive and new.

This work calls for an expansive review of human management of our borrowed time. Yet despite everything, it is shrouded in hope - that beyond the charred skies of a disheartened world are the promises of new and invigorating futures, inclusive of peoples, lands, and a hunger for the vitality of life. After the flames there is a moment of embedding biochar into a form of renewal that draws us on towards a life of plenty.

Tillers' *Book of Power* records the folio of each canvas board, with various sketches and other material all assuming their own folio. The system is akin to Mozart's Köchel (K) numbers, which allows Tillers to create a sequential ordering of a life's work.

His desire to create installations required Tillers to make an early call as to whether his practice would ultimately to be two or three dimensional. Though broadly regarded as a painter, in the end he designed something of a hybrid that gave him the option to go either way: at times, he has neatly stacked and exhibited his canvas boards as an installation, rather than laying them out flat and displaying them on the gallery wall. This leaves the viewer to wonder about the image hidden within, of the secret, like the mysteries of Gaia: a volcanic force, with the authority to command respect.

When displayed as an artwork, his images are layered with reference to classical texts, extending a ladder to another realm. From this vantage, the viewer is invited to unfold what is hinted and suggested, more than fully drawn.

He quotes the Bible, and in his characteristic eclecticism, the Buddha is represented too, as is the arrogance of Captain Cook, specifically, Cook's decision to overlook the people of Australia, which his English gaze apparently failed to see. This is unfortunate, since back then, fires were largely better managed, as evidenced by John Blair's research into

the ancient growth rings of trees, and the practical impacts of cool fire burning, which in the past, did much to protect the landscape from the kind of horrific events experienced during the Black Summer Fires.

In a nod to contemporary times, it is not a voice from the artworld who frames this exhibition - it is Charles Massy, whose land on the Monaro remained a rare oasis during the worst of the drought due to his regenerative farming practices. Massy comments on the parallel he sees between Tillers' work and the emerging signs that Earth has entered the Anthropocene. The fires, Massy says, were a crucial awakening to how close we have pushed things towards what he calls a "dangerous and unpredictable epoch".

Meanwhile, a major response to all that happened and all that is predicted has launched at Bundanon, with the return of 1,448 important Australian works by Boyd, Nolan, Perceval, Joy Hester and Charles Blackman, which are all to be cared for in a new disaster-proof subterranean gallery, designed by architect Kerstin Thompson Architects.

As Tillers' numbered tiles climb towards infinity, the artist, like everyone, is preoccupied with responding to one wave of crisis after another, themes which were always apparent in his work. It is this life-long obsession which has placed his work in the global context over a career spanning half a century, using his stylised lettering to spell out the danger of believing the myths of our times.

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