

# THE LIFE-MOTIF

INTERVIEW WITH IMANTS TILLERS

BY JENNIFER SLATYER

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JS: The earliest work in this exhibition, *Untitled* 1978, consists of two divergent photo-mechanical reproductions on canvas (one could call them 'simulations') of a painting, *Summer*, painted in 1909 by the Australian landscape painter Hans Heysen. Is this a seminal work for you?

IT: Yes. In *Untitled* the complexity and confusion of my earlier concerns were distilled into an extremely clear and simple statement. From that time on I was able to view my work from a different vantage point.

JS: In 1979, the English artist Robin Coombes noted in the catalogue for the 3rd Biennale of Sydney that the real quality of this work rested in your ability to demonstrate a sense of irony which is used to question the nature of painting and mechanical reproductive processes. According to Coombes, by taking as your source a poor reproduction of an original Heysen, itself a provincial landscape and by further enlarging it many times, that you had shown "in a truly original fashion that an extremely dull image devoid of interesting incident can yield an unlikely and fresh insight into painting, but without the use of actual paint." And further, he felt that by making two nearly identical versions, the value and purpose of art-reproduction (especially in the service of banality) is sharply questioned. However, the two versions aren't identical – they differ in colour and contrast. What is the origin of their difference?

IT: The difference is due to the age and source of the respective reproductions. The one which is in soft focus and purplish in hue is from a print from the 1950's obtained on my first trip as a child to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. The other one is from an exhibition catalogue of the 1970's. However, I didn't intend this work to be a comment on the

mood or graphic style of particular decades, nor a critique of the mediocrity of the so-called 'Australian landscape tradition'. Nor did I simply want to represent or 'appropriate' Heysen's work – not that 'appropriation' was a word with any currency then. It was a sense of *indifference* to it as an image, that caused me to use it. Robin Coombes was close to the mark when he referred to my enlargement of Heysen's image as "a neutral surface or vehicle (not dissimilar in feeling to the basic geometries of reductive abstract art) to which we can apply many interpretations." My *Untitled* was conceived in the spirit of Arakawa's famous canvas of 1969, also *Untitled*, which was inscribed: "I have decided to leave this canvas completely blank." Here, of course, as the intention is defeated by its announcement, the painting denies the very statement it consists of. The effect is similar to the allusion to a specific but hidden content in Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* 1967-8. This painting consists of two panels. One is blank and the other contains the pronouncement: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret known only to the artist."

JS: Another painting which has influenced you greatly comes from 1969 too – Sigmar Polke's *Höhere Wesen befohlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* This painting consists solely of the words (translated) "Higher Beings Command: leave the top right hand corner black!" and a black top right hand corner.

IT: The Polke painting is important to me because it reiterates Duchamp's insight that "to all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing." But in Polke's painting the artist is nothing *but* a medium – there is no content

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other than that which is commanded by 'higher beings'. Needless to say these 'higher beings' direct him to do something incredibly mundane, even banal.

JS: There is a personal connection for you too with Polke. We met him and Achim Duchow (as a duo) in 1975 at the Sao Paulo Bienal in Brazil where Polke was representing West Germany with Baselitz and Palermo and you were representing Australia with George Baldessin.

IT: On meeting Polke I was impressed by his "okkulte intelligenzen" – exemplified by the fact that he apparently had no need for books, as his brain was in direct contact with a higher intelligence but also his rather cavalier attitude to the authority of American art and artists. I still remember their first words to me: "You look weird." (I had thought that they were the weird ones.) "Why?" I asked. "Look in the mirror!" My work at the Bienal *Conversations with the Bride* was a maze of small freestanding images at eye-level with mirrors on each reverse face. There were 112 mirrors to look in. I had included mirrors in this work because in Jorge Luis Borges' parable *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* Bioy Casares had recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that "mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men" in the world. *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* was of great importance to me then as it expanded on the idea of a novel in the first person in which the narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers to perceive, as Borges describes it, "an atrocious or banal reality". But even more fascinating was the idea of a fantastic world (that of *Tlon*) intruding secretly into the world of reality and then subtly and irrevocably displacing the real. This

was achieved in Borges' fiction by following a plan of exhibiting a world which was not *too* incompatible with the real, like Polke's elusive and arcane paintings of the 60's which are neither quite "Pop" nor "minimal" yet somehow could be related to both.

JS: So thirteen years later Polke's "atrocious and banal reality" certainly seems to have taken precedence in the artworld over the "art of the real". Even so, artists such as Carl Andre who were influential on your work in the early 70's have continued to influence you despite their exit from the centre stage.

IT: It was Andre's idea of making works from mass-produced "democratic" industrial materials that led me to adopt canvasboards as the material support for my paintings in the first place. Canvasboards are of course, mass-produced for amateur painters. Originally I used *Rowneys*, then *Daler* and now mostly *Frederix* brand canvasboards. Since 1981 I have consumed over 17,000 panels. Andre also influenced my decision to exhibit my paintings de-composed into *Stacks* – stacks of single-panel paintings where the characteristics of weight, volume, number and mass dominate those of colour, form and imagery. I have recently acknowledged my debt to Andre more directly in several floorpieces made from vitreous enamel on steel, a medium which I first investigated as a solution to the problem of decorating the curved interior of the Dome of the Federation Pavilion.

JS: We are all familiar with Andre's famous defence of minimalism, in which he declared that the environment already contained too many objects and now "requires significant blankness... some *tabula rasa*, some space that suggests significant exhaustion." He stated that when signs occupy every surface, then there is no place for new signs. The Australian critic, Terence Maloon has suggested that in 1983 you



changed the minimalist grid into its antithesis: instead of being a locus of significant blankness, it began to support a profusion of overlaid, scrambled imagery. However, as he observed, the image-overload (the return of the repressed) produced an oddly similar effect to the "significant exhaustion" of classical minimalism. The excess of imagery canceled itself out and caused the viewer to blank out in response. So it seems you've heeded Andre's call for "significant blankness" but what was Polke's attitude to Andre?

IT: Polke's attitude is clearest in his painting *Carl Andre in Delft* 1969 in which he equates Andre's elegant checkerboards to Delft tiles. It is also evident in works such as *Mit gelben Quadraten* 1968 and *Mit weissen Quadraten* 1968 where in both cases the ground onto which "the white and yellow squares" are painted is a cheap, standard-issue blanket – definitely not the sort of material Andre would choose. Polke, like his contemporaries Richter and Baselitz, railed against the influence of American art in the 60's – "the voices of authority", "the higher beings" – with a rage not unlike that of the atheist who shakes his fist at God's throne in the heavens shouting "I do not believe in you!" – blasphemies that are worth uttering only because they take His name in vain.

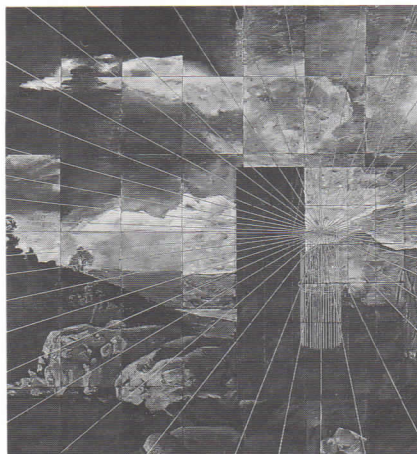
JS: Donald Kuspit, in reviewing your first solo show in New York at the Bess Cutler Gallery in 1984, likewise reacted angrily with a scathing review in *Art in America*. He was apparently outraged by your savage parody of the artists he revered then, mentioning Chia, de Chirico, Schnabel, Salle and Dokoupil in particular. He wrote: "taken together, the paintings in this exhibition constitute a super parody which reveals the limits of parody: the joke may have been on the joker. This is partly because Tillers' methods

of parody are far from subtle. His slapstick use of a uniform painterliness reduces partially painterly images to the point of absurdity, though he claims he simply "re-articulates" images he admires". And later he says "Tillers seems to believe that authenticity and authority are merely a matter of fashion, and manipulated taste, a kind of gallery-directed conspiracy of art history-making. *Call of Continuity* 1984 shows a figure from a Dokoupil painting literally drumming up another ghostly expressionist figure." Kuspit goes so far as to claim that, "what postmodernist Tillers is in effect attempting is a ruthless extinction not only of a kind of painting, but of an entire aspect of human experience." Does this mammoth declamation represent an accurate portrayal of your project?

IT: I feel that Kuspit's outburst was a response only to the outermost, superficial layers of my work. As the Danish artist, Per Kirkeby has pointed out, all paintings consist of the laying of layer upon layer. Sometimes these layers are 'synchronous', with all the layers aiming at the same picture – where the underpainting and following layers fall precisely on top of each other. At other times they are "unsynchronous", with each new layer forming a new autonomous picture. This is easily understood when it comes to Pica-bia's or Salle's "puzzle pictures". Furthermore these 'unsynchronous' paintings are like "geological strata with cracks and discordances. But each new layer is always infected and coloured by the underlying one. Thus it is with all pictures, there are many layers and with good reason an analysis nearly always deals only with the last." To quote at length from his essay *Caption* contained in his anthology *Selected essays from Bravura* 1982:

"The problem is how can one talk of what one cannot

KANGAROO BLANK 1988  
 acrylic, gouache, oilstick on 78  
 boards  
 87" x 77"



see – the overpainted or wiped-off layers. The answer is that they exist nevertheless, taken up into the visible layers by a rubbing-off, but the problem, on the whole, is how one deals with the visible layer. The angle-sure, viewpoint-seeking and in the worst sense 'analytic' intercourse with the picture. This method does not call up the invisible layers. The invocatory tone of intercourse is the 'synthetic', which does not seek results immediately but treats the picture sensually and then allows the apparently most unreasonable associations to grow. In this way invisible layers in oneself are invoked, and this is the only kind of invisible layer which allows itself to be invoked."

I have adopted this slow "synthetic" approach in relation to all my sources – in 1984 it was to Chia, de Chirico, Schnabel, Salle and Dokoupil. All the artists Kuspit names. In this way I attempted to invoke the invisible layers of myself, to discover my own unique subjectivity. Unfortunately Kuspit did not respond to the paintings themselves but rather to a hidden agenda – a threatening ideology (opposing the very possibility of a personal subjectivity) which he mistakenly imagined lay behind my works.

JS: Which artists would you invoke now, in 1988?

IT: Alfred Jensen, Sherrie Levine, Edgar Heap of Birds and Colin McCahon.

JS: Why McCahon?

IT: The power and poetry of his paintings and the fact that he dares to quote from God. (Like Polke, he too has obeyed the commands of higher beings and painted several of his top right-hand corners black.) As a painter in a distant provincial setting (antipodean New Zealand) he compensates for his innate powerlessness by the inherent power of his quota-

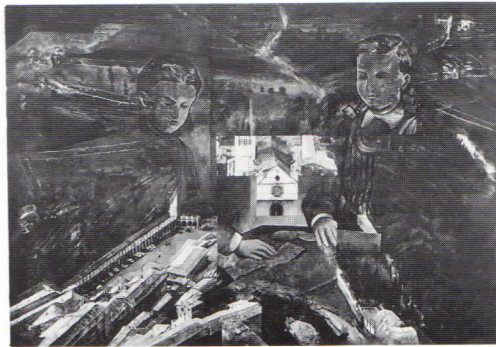
tions. Also I relate to McCahon's role as not only a painter but also (in relation to his sources) as an anthologist, collector and translator. As the New Zealand critic Wylan Curnow observed, McCahon was mindful of "the book of his own work", as year by year his collections of quotations grew. He was concerned with how the addition of this or that text reinforced or complicated the story so far. But all-encompassing books are destined to remain unfinished. So in 1987 McCahon died 'mid-sentence' just as the author René Daumal died earlier this century, departing his great allegory of life, *Mount Analogue*, literally mid-sentence while still in the process of collecting 'peradams' on the uphill ascent.

JS: McCahon's "book of his own work" sounds remarkably like your own concept of the *Book of Power* in which you see your work in terms of a huge all-inclusive book where each canvasboard panel is a page in the book and each page is numbered consecutively from one to infinity. In fact at this moment you are at the page marked 17187 and there is a long way to go. Did this idea come from McCahon?

IT: No, it's purely coincidental. It's actually Mallarmé's idea, who wrote in 1895: "Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book." As Curnow points out, the process of 'quotation' in McCahon is simply the extraction of signs from one context and their transference into another. I can relate to that. I like the poetry of 'translation'. 'To translate' can mean a lot of things: 1. bear away, convey or remove from one person, place or condition to another, to transfer, transport 2. to turn from one language into another 3. to interpret, explain, to express one thing in terms of another 4. to change in form, appearance or substance, to transmute, to transform. I much prefer these meanings to those of that other word recently de-



VISIBLE SUSPENSION 1981  
acrylic on canvas  
52" x 76"



valued by overuse 'appropriation'.

JS: In the current exhibition your most recent work *Quest: I the Speaker* 1988 is large painting made up of 170 canvasboard panels. The superficial look of this work comes from several readily identifiable sources: for example, the right-hand side consists of an adaptation of McCahon's painting *Untitled (is there anything of which one can say, Look this is new?)* 1982; and the gold radiating column – a distinctive Arakawa device – is superimposed over the inverted Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, the image of the Basilica being a familiar one to viewers of your earlier works from the Assisi series. We can also see a process of layering and a concern with the 'fundamental truth' of painting as Kirkeby characterised it – "the laying of layer upon layer" in this and another related work *Kangaroo Blank* (fig.1) in which the Assisi landscape has been displaced by Stubbs' imaginary Australian landscape.

IT: Yes, *Quest, I the Speaker* (and for that matter *Kangaroo Blank*) relate to the two paintings I first exhibited in London at the Serpentine Gallery in 1982 as part of the exhibition *Eureka! Artists from Australia*. This pair of almost identical canvases was entitled *One Painting, Cleaving* and was subsequently shown in a modified form at *Documenta 7* in Kassel where they were exhibited in a changed configuration and renamed *Two Paintings, Hidden from view*. The same pair has now coincidentally returned to London in a slightly different form, as part of the exhibition *Stories of Australian Art* at the Commonwealth Institute during April and May. These are part of a series of paintings based on a particular view of the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi containing Giotto's famous cycle of frescoes on the life of St. Francis and assorted sacred relics – a mecca for art historians.

The view itself comes from a tourist postcard which had been distorted as a result of 'mis-registration' in the process of photo-mechanical reproduction. The attraction for me to this straightforward technical mistake was not in its matter-of-fact banality but in its rich allegorical potential. I called this extensive series of works *One Painting* as I was fascinated at the time with the idea of a series which consisted of one obstinately recurring image or conversely, a series of 'precise variations' (like in late de Chirico) on a single theme. But as I anticipated in 1982 "the *one painting* is also *cleaving* and other images appear in the gap (the *triangle of doubt*)." These images have been proliferating exponentially ever since, fixed on the canvasboard pages of my *Book of Power*.

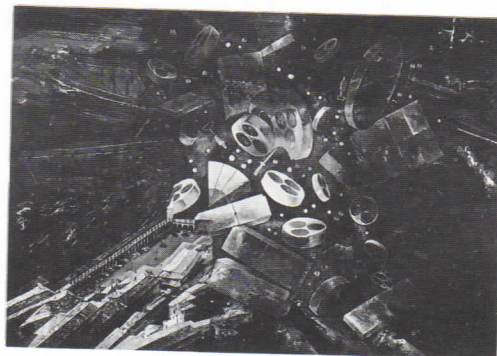
JS: Was the history of *One Painting* before this 'conceptual cleavage' a process of accumulation of 'invisible' layers?

IT: Yes, right from the start each painting consisted of several distinct pictures superimposed over each other, with the last layer always being the out-of-register Basilica. The first version was painted in 1980 and called *The Modern Picture (Worlds in Collision)*. I had the first layer of this painting photographed and would sometimes invoke this 'painting which no longer exists' in place of subsequent layers or versions. The first such version 'which no longer exists' appeared in *Art in America* in January 1981.

JS: In *Two Paintings, Hidden from view* what exactly is hidden from view?

IT: Two moods, a deeper reality beyond appearances but also literally two other pictures. One was based on a Latvian social-realist style illustration of sisters ironing ribbons and the other a stylised model of German origin demonstrating the disintegration of

VISIBLE SUSPENSION 1981  
 acrylic on canvas  
 52" x 76"



cell structures at a microscopic level. To me they also suggested two different 'world pictures' and I wanted to record the transition of each image to its outer layer – the Basilica – so I recorded this silent evolving drama over a period of 12 months with a polaroid camera. The inevitable conclusion was as satisfying as the title of Duchamp's study of the endgame in chess: *Sister Squares in Opposition, reconciled*.

JS: In recording the hybrid states of these two canvases which in their transitional phase were called *Visible Suspension* (see fig.2 and fig.3), you seem intent on demonstrating the existence of the invisible layers in order to undermine the priority of the last, visible layer.

IT: Yes that's true. But it also reflected a lack of faith in the act of painting itself. I did not have the self-assurance of an artist like Kirkeby who knows that the invisible layers are there but has no need to 'prove' it. Here I had spent an entire year painting many pictures but in the end I only had 3 modestly scaled near-identical canvases of an out-of-register Basilica and some polaroids to show for my considerable efforts. With the current canvasboard works I have dispensed with the need to record the successive vanishing layers of imagery and the idiosyncratic trajectories of specific canvasboard panels back and forth from painting to painting as new works take shape or evaporate. It is a private drama. Also I imagine that each new composite canvasboard painting is really like another layer of the one all-encompassing painting (the *One Painting*) whose visible layer is continually changing like a palimpsest, according to the changing focus of my point of consciousness from one moment to the next. Yet each new layer is also a fresh reworking of a deeper struc-

ture. As Kirkeby has said (and again I'll quote at length):

"the ruthless accumulation of 'structure' reworkings leads to one meeting one's motif. One's life-motif, so to speak. That which one has and does not know that one has it. A sort of geology, as when, in a constant process, sedimentation and erosion makes the earth we live on like it is now, without any meaning in itself in a rational sense, but accepted as that upon which we live in this life. But just as sedimentation has no particular purpose, neither can painterly structures have one. But under way the 'accidental' nears something resembling this temporary life. That which we read as the motif." Ultimately, the *One Painting* is the motif. The process of accumulating layers maps the search for a motif. In the Assisi series the motif was chosen – its outer form determined *a priori* (even though it was accidentally obtained) but with the canvasboard works I do not know where or onto what new artistic outbreak my attention will settle, tied as my method is (by necessity and a certain incurable restlessness) to the idiosyncracies of an artworld whose trajectory defies prediction. T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* wrote:

*'We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of our exploring  
 will be to arrive where we started  
 and know the place for the first time.'*