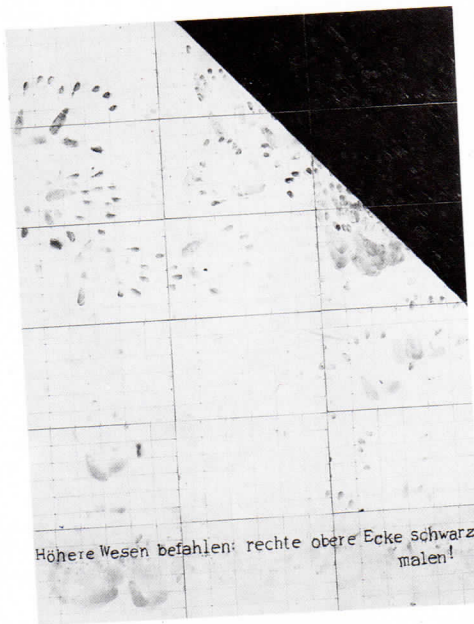


IMANTS TILLERS AS A SITE OF CONFLICT

In a memorial address at the Wollongong City Gallery, New South Wales, artist Imants Tillers spoke of the turmoil in his ancestral homeland Latvia, and the way this and other issues are manifested in his work.

I feel very honoured to be asked to give the 2nd Bob Sredersas Memorial Lecture, following in the distinguished footsteps of Daniel Thomas who gave the first last year.

As some of you may already know, Bob Sredersas arrived in Wollongong from Lithuania in 1950 and worked at the steel-works until his retirement. His personal passion, however, was to collect works of art and on a meagre labourer's salary he managed to amass a collection which is today valued at \$1 million. Before he died in 1982 he donated this collection to the City of Wollongong and it forms the basis for the collection of the Wollongong City Art Gallery. Bob's motivation was not status or financial reward but obviously a passion for art. To quote Nina Oliver who visited his fibro home in the 1960s:



IMANTS TILLERS, Higher beings command: paint the top right hand corner black!, 1984, charcoal on 18 canvasboards, No. 3738-3755, 152.4 x 114.3cm, collection of the artist

Every wall was covered with paintings, from ceiling to floor, even the kitchen. They were wonderful paintings, propped up behind the stove, on a shelf above the toilet, under the bed. The furniture was sparse — a table and wooden chairs, linoleum on the floor. But you couldn't see the walls; there was no space between the paintings.

There are many things familiar to me about Bronius (call me Bob) Sredersas even though I never met him — for my parents too came as 'D.P.s' (displaced persons) from the Baltic after the Second World War. They came from Latvia, a sister country to Lithuania and, like Bob, arrived in Australia alone and penniless but grateful after the tribulations of war-time to start a new and better life. Having married in a German camp, my father Imants (call me Harry), like Bob, began work here as a labourer for the Water Board at Woronora and my mother



IMANTS TILLERS, *La Citta di Riga*, 1988, acrylic, gouache, oilstick on 119 canvasboards, No. 16593-16711, 279.4 x 342.9cm, private collection

worked as a live-in domestic help for nearly two years. These experiences are common to many immigrants who arrived here in the late 1940s. It is partly for this reason that I wanted to give this lecture.

I had two titles for this talk. Firstly I wanted to call it 'Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict' and then it occurred to me that what I wanted to say could be described equally well as 'On Incommensurability and the Realm of Possibility'. Now I think it could even be called 'I am Latvian'.

The year 1988 has been remarkable. In Australia we have witnessed the Aborigines, descendants of the victims of the first European settlement in 1788, not boycott the Bicentennial celebrations but actively

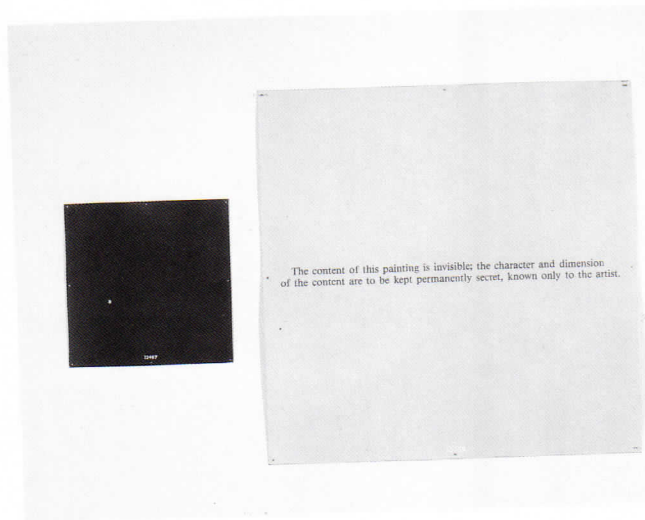
use them as an opportunity to publicize their grievances and causes as well as their cultural heritage. Certainly Aboriginal art and culture has had wider circulation and visibility this year than ever before.

However, the Aboriginal presence in what might have been a year of mourning for them is not what I wanted to talk about, but about the homeland of my parents and of Bob Sredersas — the Baltic countries — for it is here that an equally remarkable thing is taking place.

In 1982 I wrote an essay entitled 'Locality Fails' in which I suggested that an unexpected connectedness could exist between events in places remote to each other and that this connectedness could

allow an experimenter (artist) in one place to affect the state of a system in another remote (apparently unconnected) place. Ironically, this principle has come to haunt me in 1988. For how else can we explain the changes in Riga, Vilnius and Tallin in our Bicentennial year?

When the Soviet Union, in recognition of the resurgent nationalism in its Baltic republics, gave official status to the flags which Latvia and Lithuania flew as independent countries but which had been outlawed for nearly fifty years, there were incredible scenes reported even on Australian television and in the printed media. When did these distant regions last make international news? The parlia-



IMANTS TILLERS, *Secret Painting/Red Square*, 1987, vitreous enamel on 2 steel panels, No. 13487-13488, 53.3 x 53.3; 121.9 x 121.9 cm, collection of the artist

ments of Latvia and Lithuania also voted to give official status to their own languages, replacing Russian, in far-reaching moves that sought to redeem President Gorbachev's pledge for the devolution of political power. In Riga, the Latvian capital, more than 150,000 people turned out when the old maroon and white flag of independent Latvia was unfurled at an emotional rally in a park on the city's outskirts.

In Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, an estimated 100,000 people took part in city-wide processions leading to Gediminas Tower on the city's main square where the yellow, green and red flag of independent Lithuania flew for the first time since 1940.

While one could say that these are small concessions and that the Soviet leadership has no intention of relinquishing political power, nevertheless these changes have provoked intense emotions. In Latvia, the issue of national identity is particularly sensitive because, unlike in either Estonia or Lithuania, the indigenous population has become a minority.

When I was asked to do a special project for the Bicentenary issue of *ART and Australia* I wanted to address the issue of identity and power relations in the Baltic rather than in Australia. But this was in March before the dramatic changes that I

have described began to be reported in the media. My work was a gatefold based on my painting *Words of Wisdom*. The painting consisted simply of a bald typewritten text on an abstract but evocative background. The words were a paraphrase of a poem by Latvian poet Zinaida Lazda:

In this land by the River Daugava and by the sea we are to live out our days in sorrow and in joy. With hatred we will answer the enemy who comes to humble and to plunder our native land.

But I am no partisan or Latvian-in-exile. I have an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship to the homeland of my parents and its cultural heritage. I was born in Australia and have no doubts that I am Australian. However when I first went to school I could not speak any English, only Latvian. Now, I have the vocabulary in Latvian of a three-year-old child. In part, this loss of my native tongue has been due to a natural atrophy through lack of use but I also now feel that it was in part a youthful rebellion against the enormous responsibility of keeping a dying culture alive on the other side of the globe.

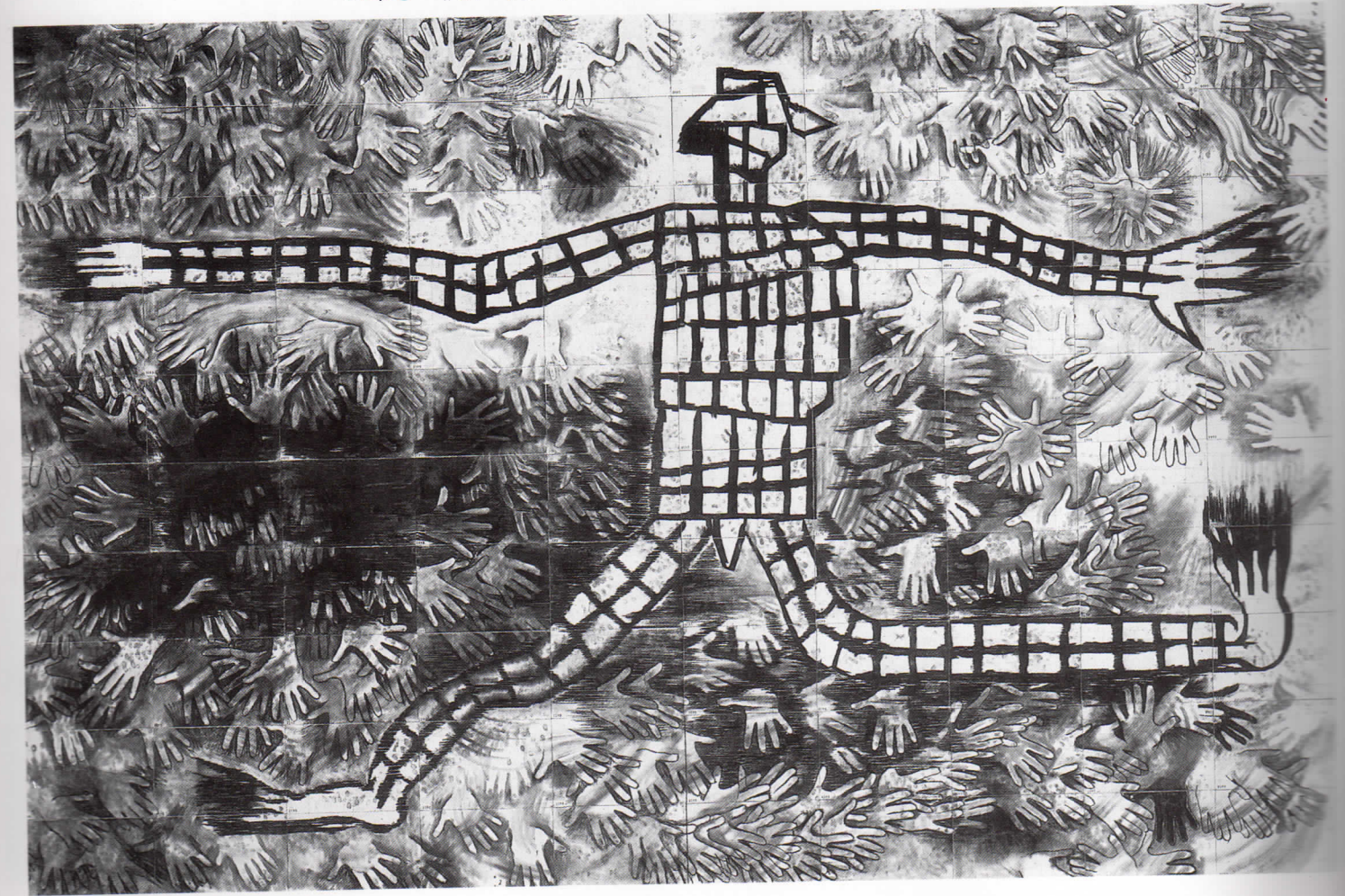
When I made my first trip to Latvia with my Australian wife it was from Paris in 1976. There, just before leaving we saw a film by one of the fathers of avant-garde

film in the USA, Jonas Mekas. Mekas was born in Lithuania and he arrived in the USA as a displaced person. His film was called *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*. It was a very moving account of his experiences of going back and being reunited with the relations and friends he had left behind as well as all the facets of daily life there — so different to his new life in New York. My response to going to Latvia, a country I thought I was already familiar with even though I had never been there before, was in a sense pre-figured and intensified by Mekas's film.

I now have vivid memories of visiting the ramshackle farmhouse at Salaspils (an area that was out of bounds to tourists) where my father grew up, virtually next door to the site of a former Nazi concentration camp. In its place now stood a desolate monument to those who died there. Also, there is the intense memory of drinking cold, fermented birch sap with the family of my mother's childhood friend Astra at their country vegetable plot.

In Latvia I was a kind of *de facto* visitor, a surrogate for my parents, visiting their old haunts and their now aged relatives and friends. The other side to this was a feeling of detachment and the sense that the 'memories' of Latvia which I had had before I went there of beautiful lakes and forests were but phantoms — not based on lived experience at all. Latvia of course was now a modern country, though impoverished by our standards and not the nineteenth-century rural paradise I had half expected. Also, there was a pervasive, underlying anxiety with all our hosts — the need to be careful about what was said and where one went. One felt under surveillance all the time and there were constant signs wherever one went that this was an occupied country.

My own experiences and Medas's great film alerted me to the possibility of working within an avant-garde tradition and yet being able to express at the same time a powerful emotional and spiritual content.



IMANTS TILLERS, *Island of the dead*, 1982, charcoal on 100 canvasboards, No. 396-495, 254 x 381cm, Australian National Gallery, Canberra

Slides from that trip subsequently became part of a work which I completed in 1978: *Reminiscences of a journey to Latvia*. In 1985 I used the title of another of Jonas Mekas's films *Lost, lost, lost*, Mekas's film records the confusion, bewilderment, relief and dislocation of the crowds of Balts and other refugees at the moment of their arrival in the ports of New York. My parents, too, could have been caught in that film, for they had wanted to go to America — but circumstances, chance, or serendipity in the post-war confusion resulted in them going to Australia instead. Therefore I am Australian, not American. Such is the fragility of national identity.

While there are many competing themes and motifs in my work, I thought that for this lecture it would be appropriate to touch on how my particular ethnic origins might have manifested themselves in my work. There are six ways in which this might be discerned:

1. The use of foreign languages in my work, particularly words and phrases in languages that I don't speak or understand yet the meaning of which is accessible in translation. This could be a sign of alienation; displacement or loss. A reminder perhaps of the loss of language, of heritage, or homeland — like the loss of part of oneself.

2. Addressing issues of power. Of centres and satellites. To be Latvian has meant, historically, being dominated by powerful neighbours — powerful in the economic, political, military and cultural sense. In Sigmur Polke's formulation of this *Higher Beings Command — Paint the top right hand corner black!* And we obey.

There is a limit to what art can do in the real world — I make no pretence to changing the inequities of the world — but at least in my work I would like to sometimes invert/subvert/pervert the existing power relations within the artworld to accommodate the cultural priorities of a minority — myself. Speed.

flexibility of response and adaptability are virtues in this situation even if it is only ultimately in order to obey.

3. Sometimes there is an allusion to a Hidden Content — a secret: like the historical aspirations of Latvians for nationhood and independence. In the late nineteenth and twentieth century it was essential for such aspirations to remain secret or encoded. This has again been necessary in Latvia since 1940 with the forced incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union and the ruthless Russification that has been taking place ever since.

In my work this has been manifested in the idea of invisible layers in certain paintings, for example in the ASSISI series. The final visible layer often has an essential relationship to what was painted over — to what is now hidden and known only to me. In some paintings there is an allusion to a Latvian iconography which might only be interpreted as such by Latvians. Generally speaking, these Baselitz wanderers might easily be seen as figures from Latvian rustic life or the heroes of Latvian folklore. The use of canvasboards themselves, slightly shonky, *hokey* materials from which to construct epically scaled works might parallel the grandiose pretensions of an essentially rural country of former serfs and peasants.

4. Use of imagery 'borrowed' from Latvian book illustrations and other sources. These images would be easily recognized by Latvians and would seem 'ethnic' to non-Latvians. This is a way of perpetuating Latvian elements alongside more powerful elements within an Australian and international context. Iwona Blazwick, the curator of my exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, described how the nineteenth-and twentieth-century masterworks I repainted had often been invaded by fragments of 'native' culture. I would add that these fragments could be 'antipodean', Aboriginal or Baltic.

5. The idea of Proliferation. Since 1981, when I started to work on composite





IMANTS TILLERS, *Polkegeist*, 1987, acrylic, oilstick, oil on 222 canvasboards, No. 10485-10706, 279.4 x 645.2cm, collection of the artist



IMANTS TILLERS, *A life of blank*, 1984, acrylic, charcoal on 6 canvasboards, No. 3777-3782, 76.2 x 76.2cm, private collection

paintings made of canvasboard panels, I have been counting them: I am now up to 19 301. This is commemorated in the painting *19 301 + as of October*. It is also the title of my forthcoming exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Wellington early next year. Elsewhere I have compared my work to a huge all-encompassing book, where each canvasboard panel is a page. As the French poet Mallarmé wrote in 1895: 'Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book'. The panels have been numbered right from the start and the panel count is continuous from 1 to ∞ . All modes of art can be accommodated within this book, and all modes of expression: from the trivial to the serious,

the banal to the profound, the pious to the blasphemous, et cetera. As I have stated elsewhere, my intention is the exhaustion of all possible categories and if I cannot finish this task I will assign someone else to continue it.

With this idea of proliferation and the power that comes from picturing or mapping one's psychic terrain there is a strong correspondence to the stockpile of Latvian folksongs which, in the absence of more developed and sophisticated cultural institutions, served as oral repositories of the Latvian cultural heritage. Since they began to be collected and recorded it has been estimated that there are millions of different songs — almost a different one

for every Latvian living today. These folksongs describe every facet of the environment, recording the daily life of the Latvian people. At the recent folkloric festival in Latvia earlier this year Janis Peters wrote in the programme notes:

On the dawn of the twentieth century Latvia was born. And the world noticed it. Because Latvia was a child of sorrow. Sorrow, because our country Latvia, our republic Latvia was born in great pains. We have dreamt and ached for our country. We have cherished and fought for it. We have defended it and we still do.

Central to this defence is the folksong:

Latvians believe in their ancient folklore which has saved the nation from destruction. The folksong to which we have given a short and euphonic name

— DAINA — has strengthened our people in political as well as culturally historical feuds.

It is also interesting for me to compare, though they are in some ways incomparable, the folksongs as the bearers of cultural meaning to the Aboriginal Dreamings. As Robert Hughes puts it, the Dreamings are the world's spirit ancestors; they brought the world out of chaos, formed it and filled it with plants, insects, animals and fish and created human society. They exist in vast numbers, and there is one for every nameable entity.

To me, the process of appropriation of other works of art and their incorporation into my ever-expanding Book of Power is also a process of naming, like that of the Aboriginal Dreamings and the Latvian DAINAS, except that my chosen world is the, world of art.

6. The title of my lecture was 'Imants Tillers as a Site of Conflict' and I do not seem to have addressed this topic directly at all. Here I was thinking of the fragmentation of the self in a process that has been described as the 'wilful dissociation of subjectiveness and style' where the image becomes the site of a transient fascination that represents not the unity of one ego but a multiple subjective view. Each painting becomes a battleground where the artist's visions and longings face a showdown with his or her knowledge of art history. Thus a momentary irritation caused by some picture from a magazine or television ad, art book or a dream battles with the need to make an image that is authentically of and about the self.

For some time I have believed that this was happening in my paintings too. That they were a battleground. The blank canvasboards were waiting to be filled and the images of other artists were waiting to fill them. I was the referee, the adjudicator. The potential images would battle it out with each other for supremacy. Sometimes Kiefer or Baselitz would triumph: at other times it would be de Chirico or Sherrie Levine or Colin McCahon or Michael Nelson Tjakamarra. I alone would

determine the fate of their images — they could become 30 feet long or miniscule — executed hastily or with great love and precision. Latvia, of course, has always been a battleground and its people resilient and resistant enough to keep their identity intact despite the odds.

7. The Idea of Incommensurability. My process is not always like a battleground. The all-inclusive potential of my project — as the accumulation of canvasboard panels inches its way to infinity — allows for the idea of incommensurability. At times there is no attempt by me to transform, assimilate or synthesize these streams into a more homogeneous entity but rather they simply exist side by side with each other. They are not measurable in terms of each other and the only similarity may be that they all consist of the same canvasboard particles.

For me this sense of incommensurability is a model of tolerance — of the accommodation of differences where elements do not have to justify themselves to each other or subordinate themselves to a larger, more important schema. This is the only way a small but ancient culture like Latvia can survive — if there is room for incommensurable differences in the larger scheme of things. Perhaps it is the only way that the remnants of Aboriginal culture can survive too. This is in the realm of possibility.

The artist's 'One painting, cleaving' exhibition is at the Wollongong City Gallery 9 March–15 April 1990.

Edited Transcript of the 2nd Bob Sredersas Memorial Lecture given by Imants Tillers at the Wollongong City Gallery, Wollongong, NSW, 17 November 1988.

top to bottom

IMANTS TILLERS, *Untitled*, 1982, pencil on 1 canvasboard, No. 136, 25.4 x 38.1cm, destroyed

IMANTS TILLERS, *Untitled*, 1982, pencil on 1 canvasboard, No. 178, 25.4 x 38.1cm, destroyed

IMANTS TILLERS, *Untitled*, 1982, pencil on 1 canvasboard, No. 331, 25.4 x 38.1cm, destroyed

IMANTS TILLERS, *Gustav intends to rebuild the world*, 1984, charcoal on 16 canvasboards, No. 3783-3798, 101.6 x 152.4 cm, private collection

