

Šis rindas Beisa tekstā tiek arvien no jauna atkārtotas kā tāda litānija. Divainā kārtā tās man arī liekas izsakām abus stāvokļus, kādus jebkuŗš atsevišķais audekla panelis manā gleznā var ieņemt, vispirms kā attēla daļa (1. elements) pie sienas un otrkārt kā kaudzes daļa (2. elements) uz grīdas. Panelis pat liekas burtiski „uzkāpjam” no grīdas līdz sienai un tad „nokāpjam” no sienas līdz grīdai. Beisa vārdi īstenībā nevilšus kļuva par dažu manis paša darbu pamata struktūru detaļētu aprakstu.

Atsauce uz Torvaldsena mūzeju ir Beisa *Manresas* tekstā, ko esmu citējis pats savā darbā *Izkliede*. Tur teikts: „Iespējama brūntelpa ir Torvaldsena mūzejs un no šejienes: MANRESA.”

Torvaldsena mūzejs tika būvēts īpaši 18. gadsimteŗa dāŗu tēlnieka Bertela Torvaldsena neoklasisko skulptūru novietošanai. Tā architektūra izceļas ar dažādi izkrāsotajām telpām, kas piešķir brīnišķu fonu baltā marmora — galvenokārt pagāŗu dievību — statujām. Mūzejs ir Torvaldsenam iespaidīga piemiņas vieta, un tajā ietilpst arī viņa personīgā mākslas darbu kolekcija un viņa darbu maketi. Torvaldsens pats apglabāts zem roŗu dobes mūzeja dāŗzā.

Beigās es gribētu pastāstīt personīgu anekdoti. Tai laikā, kad mani sevišķi saistīja Jozefs Beiss un viņa darbs *Manresa*, es biju atvaļinājumā Hobartā, Tasmānijā. Tad kādu saulainu dienu, 1992. gada 24. februārī, es piedāvājos aizvest uz vietējo skolu savu 8 gadus veco sievas māsas dēlu. Varat iedomāties manu pārsteigumu, kad ieraudzīju, ka skola atrodas MANRESAS LAUKUMĀ ar skatu uz ne pārāk tālo kalna virsotni, Velingtona kalnu. Šajā brīdī mans priekšstats par „vietu” sagrīŗojās vai pat nojuka. Kopš tā laika *Manresas* tekstam esmu savās domās ierādījis pavisam īpaŗu vietu. Ietilpināju tā fragmentus *Izkliedē*, un pēc tam tie arvien bieŗāk parādās manos jaunākajos darbos. Tā man ir tāda „jauna litānija”. Nav šaubu, ka *Izkliede* iezīmē pagriezīenu manā darbā daudzos zīmīgos veidos.

DIASPORA: *An Interview with Imants Tillers*

Jennifer Slatyer

JS: Your monumental painting, *Diaspora*, was conceived last year in response to a long-standing invitation from the Valsts Makslas Muzejs, or National Museum of Art in Riga, Latvia, to exhibit your work. You chose to create a single large work that could also be displayed in 48 small units, rather than to select a retrospective survey of your work over a period of time. How did you overcome your initial reluctance to accept this invitation, and can you describe how the work evolved?

IT: Firstly, I should point out that although I am Australian (born in Sydney in 1950), both my parents came to Australia from Latvia after the Second World War as refugees - as 'displaced persons'. As a child I was brought up to think of myself as an Australian in the world-at-large but a Latvian at home. Thus I have inherited two cultural identities, but through this fact, ironically, I also belong fully to neither. While as an artist working and exhibiting in Australia for twenty years, one could say that I have made a contribution to Australian culture, my work has scarcely been seen at all in Latvia. The work *Diaspora* that I am presenting at the National Museum of Art in Riga is my first real chance to address this imbalance.

The exhibition was initially proposed in 1989, but it was only following the totally unexpected collapse of communism and the regaining of independence by the Baltic States, including Latvia, in early September 1991, that it changed in my mind from a proposal to a potential reality, and

I subsequently visited Riga in November that year to help set it in motion. While there, I had to adjust my thoughts to the new political, social and economic realities, and also to the constraints of the exhibition venue. So instead of attempting a survey of my paintings of the last twenty years, I decided to produce a new work for this specific venue, which would somehow reflect the present cataclysmic historical moment and also be a kind of summation of the concerns of my art up to the present.

The result is *Diaspora*, and an important feature of this work is that it can exist in several distinct states. It can be a single, very large painting (3 metres x 10 metres) on a wall, composed of 288 canvasboard panels; it can simply be a stack of panels piled up on the floor; it can explode into smaller aggregates of images; or at the far end of this spectrum it can unfold to become 48 small (6 - panel) paintings dispersed through a space to constitute an entire exhibition. It is this last form that it will take in Riga. While one could say that every painting of mine within the canvasboard series has the potential to exist in such variable states, this has never been so consciously extended as in this work.

JS: The title of your Riga piece, *Diaspora*, refers to the dispersal of the Latvian people at the culmination of World War II. Surely this implies that your work has a political message - something that hasn't been acknowledged before?

IT: It's true that *Diaspora* refers to the dispersal of various races - not just the Latvian - and in the twentieth century this phenomenon has been particularly pronounced, in many cases as the direct effect of politics. Indeed, a country like Australia today is primarily an amalgamation of different diasporas from around the world - the Irish, the Jewish, the Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. The Latvians are just a part of that.

In a sense, my work has always had a political element to it. There is the political aspect of my kind of 'appropriation' in the power relationships it highlights and critiques - of the flow of images from the centres to the peripheries. This aspect was very clearly articulated by the British critic and philosopher, Michael Newman, in the catalogue accompanying my survey exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1988. He said then: *Tillers' approach is to construct the conditions for an awareness of positionality, the relations of power, economics and society in the construction of publics for culture.* And I feel this remains true.

On the other hand, the word 'diaspora' also refers to the actual physical structure of the work itself - the potential for a large composite image to be dispersed into smaller parts. In this respect the work *Diaspora* is a model for my entire canvasboard oeuvre since 1981. This arises because I consider all my paintings to be part of a single 'unbroken wholeness', as it were. I have referred to this 'unbroken wholeness' as *ONE PAINTING*: a large, ever-expanding totality that includes all the canvasboard panels I have already painted, and even those I have yet to paint. One could imagine them (all 39,594 panels completed to date) stacked together into one amorphous pile. Yet they would never remain there together for long. There would be a continual flow of panels from the stack, coalescing and dismembering, as it were, to form discrete paintings on the wall for a time, and then in turn these larger paintings would break down again into their individual components and become part of the stack once more. This continual movement of panels - the endless cycle of constitution, dispersion, reconstitution, dispersion, and so on - is fundamental to my work, though rarely noted.

JS: I'm interested in the sources of the many references to other artists' work in this piece. Visually, the work reads like a web or network of references, images and fragments of images and seems to represent a dense network of relationships.

IT: The sources, in no particular order, are images, words and symbols from Colin McCahon, Bernhard Blume, Nicholas Roerich, Arnulf Rainer, Mike Kelley, Georg Baselitz, Carlo Carra, Isidore Tillers (my seven year old daughter), Joseph Beuys and the former President of Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis. The primary visual source is the work of the late Colin McCahon (particularly his word and number paintings), as the 'voice from the Antipodes', so to speak, even though he is a New Zealander rather than an Australian. At the Baltic end, Nicholas Roerich (the Russian artist painting in the Himalayas in the early twentieth century), and Vytautas Landsbergis are the main references. The image based on a painting by Roerich, of a madonna holding Roerich's *Banner of Peace*, was the first image segment of *Diaspora* completed. I have been aware of and interested in Roerich's work since 1979, when I was introduced to his paintings of mountaintops by a friend. This was just prior to my first trip to New York, where I consequently sought out the well-hidden Roerich Museum on 107th Street. So it was with great excitement that I noted an entire room devoted to his mystical Tibetan landscapes at the National Museum of Art in Riga during my recent visit in 1991. It was also very fitting that the Dalai Lama of Tibet happened to be one of the first people to view my version of Roerich's Madonna and the *Banner of Peace*, when it was presented in the exhibition *The Living Mandala*, organised in his honour at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in April 1992.

In *Diaspora* I have also quoted two of Landsbergis' Fluxus works: his *Spatial Poem No.3* and *Spatial Poem No.5* from 1972. I have added my own speculative *Spatial Poem No.79*, attributing to Landsbergis, as President of Lithuania and a card-carrying member of Fluxus, the idea for *The Baltic Way*. This event occurred on 23 August 1989, and involved one million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians joining hands in a continuous human chain across 680 kilometres, stretching from Tallinn, the Estonian capital in the north-east, linking Riga in Latvia to Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital in

the south-west. Many think that this brave and defiant action, executed with great precision and organisational skill, together with Landsbergis' other quixotic confrontations with the Soviet Union, was an important catalyst, perhaps the major one (when things were in the balance) in the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Lithuanian founder of the art movement *Fluxus* in the early sixties, George Maciunas, who was a childhood friend of Landsbergis, would no doubt have applauded this social sculpture on aesthetic rather than political grounds. *Here Speaks Fluxus/Fluxus. Here Speaks Fluxus/Fluxus.*

JS: Conceptually, the work *Diaspora* is like an intersection point of a wide range of references and associations that have occupied you over the last decade or so. This suggests a culmination of current themes in your work, in much the same way as there was in *Suppressed Imagery* back in 1981. Do you see a similarly dramatic change in the direction of your work flowing from this major piece?

IT: There is a resemblance to my first canvasboard work, *Suppressed Imagery*, formally - in that both consist of an assemblage of images from various sources, and both indicate the beginnings of a new path. *Suppressed Imagery* was like a bridge between what had happened before (quoting from my series based on the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, which preceded the canvasboard works directly) and at the same time hinting at what might lie ahead. In the same way *Diaspora* in some respects appears to be a summation of what has transpired in the canvasboard works until now, and yet opens up a new direction for the future.

JS: Graham Coulter-Smith, in his still incomplete and unpublished doctoral thesis, has proposed that your canvasboard works are - contrary to prevailing opinion - in fact inextricably linked to and growing out of your earlier pre-canvasboard works. He analyses in great detail your early

systems-theory-based works. This idea of your work being a continuous coherent output meshes nicely with your own expressed notions of the Book of Power. Your early works such as *Enclosure* (1973), *Moments of Inertia* (1973), and even *Conversations with The Bride* (1975), demonstrate your idea of a model or system, where individual paintings or elements are meaningful only in the context of the overall system.

IT: Yes, there has always been a tendency in my work to think in terms of the relationship between the parts of the work and the whole. The whole has generally been composed of many separate elements, linked systematically to each other through certain common features but typically separated from each other in space. Indeed *Diaspora* is similar in this respect to those earlier works.

The thesis I wrote in 1972, entitled *The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting*, explored the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *Systems Theory* as an alternative to mechanistic thought, particularly in relation to the contemporary art of the time. My early works tried consciously to apply this theory in the making of art, but then a little later I began to pursue a less self-conscious and more idiosyncratic path. Recently, however, I have again come to see the relevance of certain ideas in science to art, and of the approaches of scientists such as Rupert Sheldrake (in biology), and Fritjof Capra and David Bohm (in physics), have been of great interest to me. This is partly because I have come to regard all my canvasboard paintings as forming a kind of Large Image Field - displacing my former concept of the Book of Power, which now seems to imply a simple linear (and therefore inadequate) progression of changing imagery. I am particularly interested in the book by the quantum physicist and philosopher David Bohm: *Wholeness and the implicate Order* (1981). In this book Bohm proposes a new model of reality. He argues that if we are guided by a self-willed view we

will perceive and experience the world as fragmented. Such a view is false, because it is based on our mistaking the content of our thought for a description of the world as it is. Bohm introduces the notion of the implicate order, in which any element contains enfolded within itself the totality of the universe - his concept of totality includes both matter and consciousness.

Bohm's ideas are also very compatible with those of quantum physicists such as Fritjof Capra, and his teacher and mentor Geoffrey Chew. Capra talks of a 'network of relationships' at the sub-atomic level, and how the observer needs to 'cut out certain patterns' to make sense of these relationships. The problem is to determine 'where to cut'.

My work *Diaspora* was painted in the period in which I was considering some of these new ideas, and it occurred to me that both Bohm's and Capra's ideas had relevance to my canvasboard project of the last decade. Bohm's model of reality appealed, and I even began to wonder in what sense it might be possible to consider that each canvasboard panel might have the totality of the entire canvasboard oeuvre somehow enfolded within it. This was a quantum leap conceptually from my prior habit of simply allocating a new number to each consecutive panel to connect it to the whole - to the *ONE PAINTING*. *Diaspora* heralds a new paradigm in my art.

JS: In *Diaspora* there are a number of references to the small Spanish town of Manresa, and to the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. What is the relevance of these places to your work?

IT: Manresa is a Catalanian village at the foot of the Montserrat, near Barcelona. In this village, Ignatius of Loyola had, after a stay on the Montserrat, spent a long time in penitence and undergone his mystical experiences. It was here that he began to write his *Spiritual Exercises* in 1523.

The German artist Joseph Beuys also visited Manresa, and then subsequently named one of his actions after the place. This performance was carried out in December 1966 at the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf. I happened to be reading a transcription of this performance in Hobart, Tasmania, in February 1992, and several parts struck a resonance with my own work. For example I found in the descriptive text the line: *n is the point of intersection of three rays*, which echoed fairly precisely a key line in a number of texts I wrote in 1982 on *the point of intersection of 3 rays*, in relation to my own concept then of *the triangle of doubt*.

I also found the following lines in the Beuys text concerning the Manresa action:

Now element 2 has climbed up to element 1.

Now element 1 has climbed down to element 2.

These lines are repeated over and over in the Beuys text like a litany. Curiously, they also seem to express for me the dual conditions that any given canvasboard panel has within a painting of mine: firstly, as part of an image (Element 1) on the wall; and secondly, as part of a stack (Element 2) on the floor. The panel even seems literally to 'climb up' from the floor to the wall, and then 'climb down' from the wall to the floor. Beuys's words in fact start to embody, inadvertently, a detailed description of some of the fundamental structures in my own work.

The reference to the Thorvaldsen Museum is in Beuys's text for *Manresa*, which I have quoted in my own work *Diaspora*. It reads:

*A possible brownroom is Thorvaldsen Museum and from here:
MANRESA.*

The Thorvaldsen Museum was built especially to house the neo-classical sculptures of the 18th-century Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen.

The architecture is notable for its many differently coloured rooms that brilliantly set off the white marble of his sculptures - principally of pagan deities. The museum is a comprehensive memorial to Thorvaldsen, and also includes his personal art collection and the models for his works. The sculptor himself lies buried under a bed of roses in the courtyard of the museum.

There is finally a personal anecdote I would like to mention. At the time that I had this intense attraction to Joseph Beuys and his work *Manresa* I was on holidays in Hobart, Tasmania. Then one sunny day, 24 February 1992, I offered to take my eight-year-old nephew to his local school. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that it was located in *MANRESA COURT*, with a view to the not-so-distant mountaintop, - Mt. Wellington. At that moment the concept of 'locality' appeared to me to have been suspended or even to 'have failed'. Since then the text of *Manresa* has assumed a special status for me. I included fragments of it in *Diaspora* and it is subsequently appearing with greater frequency in my more recent work. For me it is a 'new litany'. There is no doubt that *Diaspora* is a turning point within my oeuvre in many significant ways.