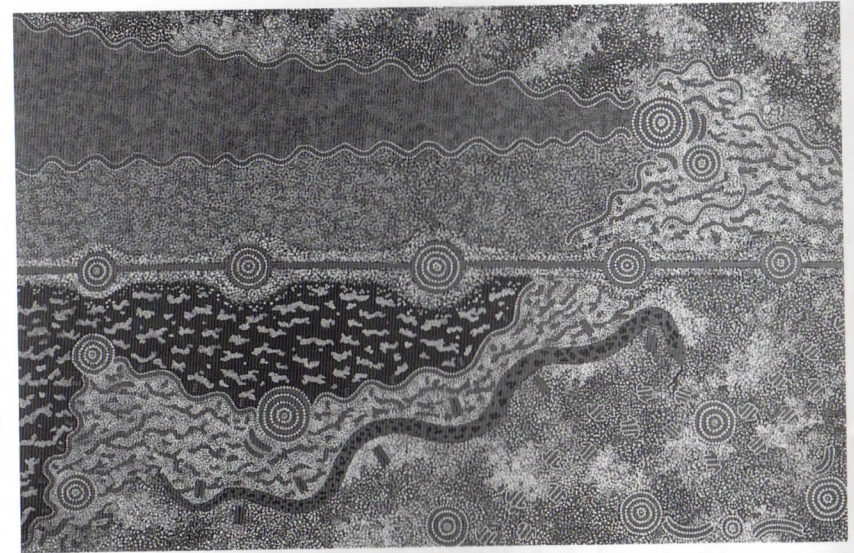




*Imants Tillers The nine shots (1985) oil stick and acrylic on canvasboards, 3300 x 2660mm.*



*Michael Nelson Tjakamarra Five dreamings (1984) acrylic on canvas, 1220 x 1820 mm.*



# POETIC JUSTICE — A CASE STUDY

(DUE ALLOCATION OF REWARD OF VIRTUE AND PUNISHMENT OF VICE)

## IMANTS TILLERS

**WHEN THE ORGANISERS** of the *Commitments* exhibition proposed that I collaborate with an artist of Aboriginal descent, my interest was certainly aroused.<sup>1</sup> I had worked collaboratively before, but never with an Aboriginal artist. Here was my chance. For some time I had been a little envious of Tim Johnson who had found a way to collaborate with a number of the Papunya artists, indeed, arguably the most important of them all — Clifford Possum Tjappalari and Michael Nelson Tjakamarra. To me this seemed the equivalent of a regional artist of modest reputation finding a way to collaborate with Joseph Beuys or Andy Warhol. How did he do it? For the *Commitments* exhibition it would have been very exciting for me to have worked collaboratively with one of those artists that Tim had befriended, but instead I was paired with Gordon Bennett, for a number of good reasons that will soon become apparent.

In 1985 I painted *The nine shots*, which combined an image from the German artist Georg Baselitz's "Ein Neue Typ" series of the late 1960s with *Five dreamings* (1984) by Michael Nelson Tjakamarra.<sup>2</sup> Both the Baselitz and the Michael Nelson Tjakamarra had been painted on continuous lengths of canvas. *The nine shots*, however, was painted on 91 discrete, canvasboard panels, each measuring 10" by 15". These can be assembled on the wall to form a temporary painting measuring 130" by 105". When it is not attached to a wall, *The nine shots* reverts to its volumetric form, a small freestanding stack; a kind of sculpture. The canvasboards used in *The nine shots* are of the same type as the *carton* used by the Impressionists at the turn of the century. This cheap, rigid, mobile, painting support was also used by some of the Papunya artists at the genesis of the movement in the early 1970s.

Some of my appropriation works have been closely based on single images. The most faithful is probably *I am the door* (1985), which is a version of Sigmar Polke's *Paganini* (1982). I was attracted to this particular Polke because it was like a readymade Tillers, done by Polke. But *The nine shots* belongs in a different category: it is a hybrid image. The two source images are only partially quoted, and are also subjected to distortion, fragmentation and dislocation. Thus, a direct comparison with *Five dreamings* would reveal few direct correspondences. In some way it is stretching the word "appropriation" to describe it as such, particularly in the context of such artistic practices as, say, those of the American postmodernists or "appropriation artists", such as Mike Bidlo, Jeff Koons, Sherrie Levine or even David Salle. It is more like the appropriation practice of

Julian Schnabel, who is better known as a "neo-expressionist". Nevertheless it would be fair to say that it is because of this one work that I have been drawn into the debate about the "postmodern appropriation of Aboriginal imagery". Without engaging in this debate here, I would like to point out several fascinating aspects of my painting *The nine shots* and its reception.

Firstly, *The nine shots* is known to the Australian public almost exclusively through reproduction. Indeed, the debate over this work — which was not shown in the 1986 Sydney Biennale although reproduced in the catalogue — preceded the one and only occasion on which it has actually been exhibited in Australia. That was in the exhibition *A changing relationship — Aboriginal themes in Australian art 1938-1988* at the S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, in 1988. In reproduction, the essential, fragmented, discontinuous structure of my works is lost. What the Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn has described as "the literal, horizontal and vertical cuts between each panel"<sup>3</sup> appear to have healed. Indeed the paintings look as though they have been painted on a continuous canvas in regular rectangular sections like, for example, John Young's "Silhouette" series. But this is just a misleading effect of the painting being photographed and reproduced. According to Dittborn, it is "this impossibility of covering their small wounds, joints and cuts with paint" which is the essential quality of my canvasboard paintings.

Then there is the fact — which demonstrates the remarkable effect of this one painting *The nine shots* on local critical discourse — that unlike say Tim Johnson, my engagement with Aboriginal art is only a minor aspect of my canvasboard works. There are about 20 paintings between 1983 and 1993 which quote to a greater or lesser degree from Aboriginal sources — about twelve artists — from the more than 600 works I have completed since beginning my canvasboard project in late 1981. That is less than three percent.

A further facet is the issue of "error" and "misquotation". Rene Daumal in his famous essay "The lie of the truth" states: "At the beginning there was error. Truth is one, but error proliferates. Man tracks it down and cuts it up into little pieces hoping to turn it into grains of truth. But the ultimate atom will always essentially be an error, a miscalculation".<sup>4</sup> Thus as Rex Butler has noted, Juan Davila, in a much-quoted attack on Tim Johnson and me — "Aboriginality: a lugubrious game?"<sup>5</sup> — misquotes me. He attributes words from my article "Locality fails"<sup>6</sup> to me when they are in fact my





Gordon Bennett *The nine ricochets (fall down black fella, jump up white fella)* (1990) oil and acrylic on canvas and canvasboards, 2200 x 1820 mm.



Janis Jaunsdrabins *Balta gramata*, detail. p89.



paraphrase of the position which I wished to contest, not support! But, as Butler notes, "perhaps this is not merely a contingent error on Davila's part, for in a way it is the very fate of language itself, to be misquoted."<sup>7</sup>

This error is particularly significant because it inspired Gordon Bennett to paint *The nine ricochets* (fall down black fella, jump up white fella) as a kind of answer to *The nine shots* which Davila had misrepresented as "nine postmodernist shots aimed at the death of the primitive"<sup>8</sup>. In Bennett's painting on canvas, completed in 1990, the shots scatter over the surface of an image taken from old book illustrations showing us the "true history" of Australia. The dots used to bind the images are references to Bennett's general Aboriginal background — he has an Aboriginal mother and an English father — though as a diasporic Aboriginal he says "in just three generations (my specific) heritage has been lost to me. Dots are my bridge to Aboriginality"<sup>9</sup>. As Alison Carroll notes "on top of this image Bennett actually assembles a reference to another Tillers image *Pataphysical man* and on top of this a little optical puzzle "on a single canvasboard panel" which literally confounds logical image construction"<sup>10</sup>.

*The nine ricochets* launched Gordon Bennett's artistic career in a spectacular manner. This work was reproduced on the back cover of Bernard Smith and Terry Smith's important book *Australian painting 1788-1990* almost before the paint was dry. Amazing for an artist who only completed his Bachelor of Arts at Queensland College of Art in 1988. *The nine ricochets* also won Bennett the prestigious and lucrative Möet & Chandon prize for 1990. It was included in the important *Aratjara* exhibition in Europe, was used on its poster and seems to have been the image from this exhibition most often reproduced in magazines and newspaper reviews.

One can easily see how Bennett's painting appeals to a sense of "poetic justice" — an Aboriginal artist using post-modern methodologies and post-colonial rhetoric to hit back at an artist who, as Fiona Foley put it in 1987, "steals from Aboriginal culture"<sup>11</sup>. But Gordon Bennett has intervened here on behalf of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra. It would have been fascinating if Michael Nelson had responded to *The nine shots* with his own counter-work, but then Gordon Bennett would have had no job to do.

A hidden irony of *The nine ricochets* is that Bennett, in quoting from *Pataphysical man*, quotes precisely that part — the figure of the boy — which is itself a quotation from a very well-known Latvian artist and writer Janis Jaunsudrabs.<sup>12</sup> But aren't Latvians the indigenous people of a land, a land which until very recently, and except for brief periods before World War 1 and World War 2, has been colonised for over 700 years? What difference does it make to the issue at hand if I am not descended from the colonisers of Australia but perhaps a representative of yet another colonised and oppressed indigenous people? Dare I suggest that Gordon Bennett's motivations in targeting *The nine shots* might not have been totally adversarial or critical? Could there have been (even at an unconscious level) an empathic vector as well? As Gordon wrote to me in his fax

on the 4th August 1993:

*It is interesting to note that the specific quotation from your work Pataphysical man that I chose contained an image I had kept close to me since 1983, an image that I was keeping for use in the right painting at the right time. I was very excited to find this small gnostic symbol of a snake nailed to a cross revealed to me (in your work), during the painting process, situated precisely where I wanted it! Maybe there is something in mental telepathy after all!*<sup>13</sup>

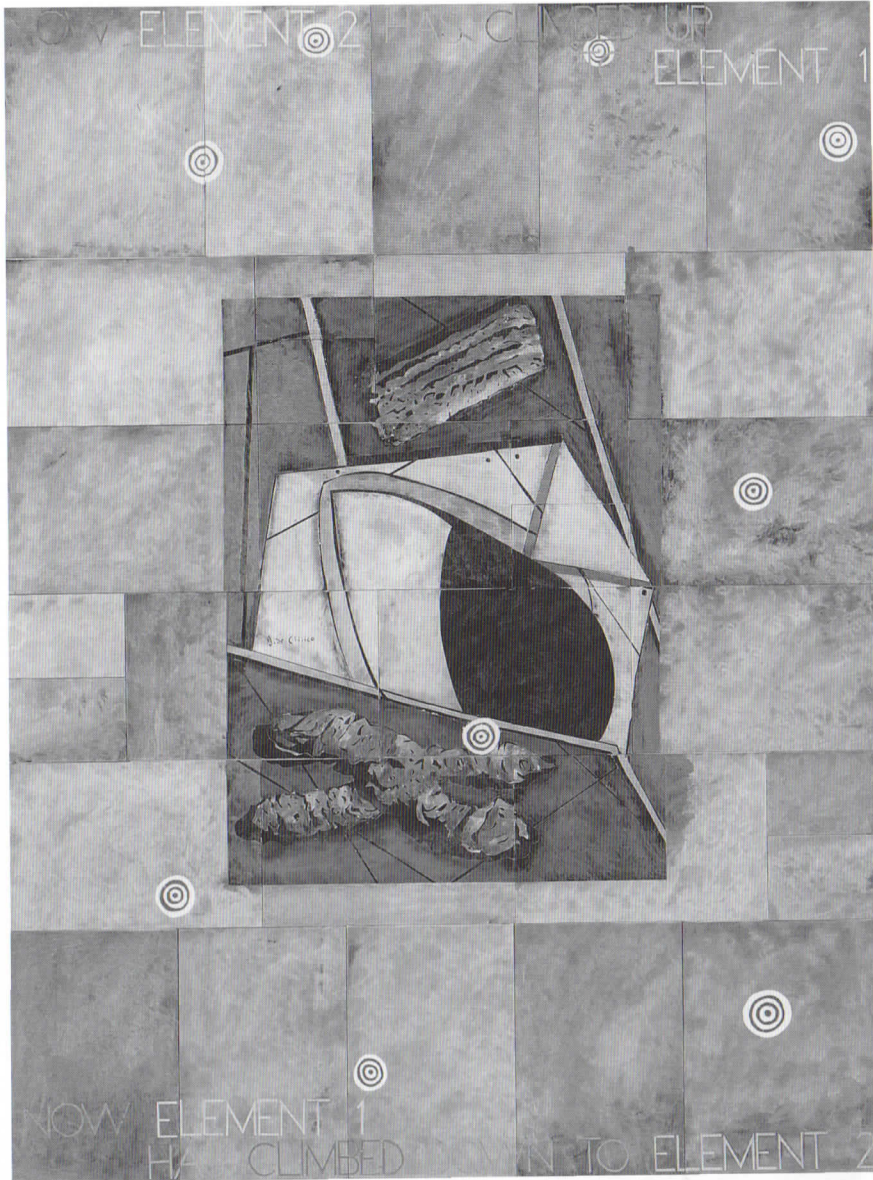
And what of the strange case of the first Aborigine to receive a Ph.D — a Dr Fesl, who is the director of Melbourne's Koorie Research Centre. Dr Fesl's thesis — the culmination of twelve years of further education — examined the treatment of Koorie languages and the use of the English language to conceal the existence of a slave trade in Australia. Dr Fesl is also a linguist and speaks not only her native language, Bandjalang, but also German, and astonishingly, Latvian and a little French.<sup>14</sup> She probably speaks better Latvian than I do! But why Latvian?

So I would like to suggest that there is more to Bennett's painting *The nine ricochets* than meets the eye. It is more than a simple case of "poetic justice" — due allocation of reward of virtue and punishment of vice — and this is the key to my collaboration with him. Certainly beyond the overt reference to my work there are other resonances which I would suggest in many cases would be unknowable to Gordon Bennett. The question is, how did they find their way into his work? The axeman, for example, in Bennett's picture is uncannily similar to any of the 30 axemen which appear in my *Conversations with the bride* (1975). The red, superimposed canvasboard panel in *The nine ricochets* echoes two prior works of mine. *Erased portrait of Murray Bail* (1985) and *The decentered self* (1985) both employ a single superimposed, monochrome canvasboard panel. The Pollock-like drips in the ground of *The nine ricochets* are contemporaneous with the start of my "Action painting" series in February 1990 and are similar to the Pollock-like drips in early canvasboard works such as *Twilight of the idols* (1983) and *Rapture* (1984).

There is also the uncanny resemblance between Bennett's statement in the 1991 Möet and Chandon touring exhibition catalogue and my text "POEM at 29343", which I produced to coincide with my exhibition *The bridge of reversible destiny* at Yuill/Crowley Gallery in April 1990. Both texts employ the same quotation from Colin McCahon's painting *Victory over death 2* (1970). Each line of our respective texts begins with the words "I AM".

But there are other parallels as well. What are we to make of Bennett's use of a one-point perspective construction as his personal logo and trademark pictorial device? It has its "other", its shadow-self, in several of my pre-canvasboard works and appears in a related form on page 49 of my 1981 book *Three facts* (the source of my image is Chinese). As Rex Butler has written, appropriation never simply works in one direction, "the process of appropriation always proceeds in two directions, is always subject to





*Imants Tillers* Painting for closed eyes; an experiment in thought transference from an image received telepathically from Gordon Bennett at 1.30 pm on July 27, 1993 (1993) oilstick, gouache, acrylic on canvasboards, 1780 x 1320 mm.



*Gordon Bennett* One work in three parts: Ricochets, Manifest destiny (a painting for the distant future: 2001?) and Window onto a shadow universe (1993) mixed media.



a prior appropriation that makes it possible".<sup>15</sup>

Thus when it was suggested that I collaborate with Gordon Bennett for *Commitments* we were already inextricably enmeshed. Perhaps a collaboration might disentangle us? Having agreed to collaborate, there was then the problem of how to proceed. I did not know Gordon personally — nor had I even had the opportunity to meet him until long after this paper was first presented.

Then, at a certain moment, while I was doing other work — and I have recorded this moment precisely because it came so vividly to me at 1.30pm on July 27, 1993 — I realised that our collaboration had already occurred. Our collaboration would be a painting of the image that I was looking at, at that precise moment — a reproduction of Giorgio de Chirico's painting *Greetings of a distant friend* (1916). It was up to me to execute the painting on canvasboard panels in my accustomed manner, but Gordon's work was already done.

Several days later when I rang Gordon to tell him — this was our first direct contact — I suggested to him that the collaboration had already taken place by telepathy. Understandably perhaps, he was not particularly taken with my suggestion. But it was not a provocation, it was what I believe had really taken place.

His reply to me by fax on 2 August fleshed out his perhaps justifiable concerns:

Dear Imants Tillers,

*I've thought about your proposal for a work based on an image received telepathically from myself. I need to know more information before I can agree to your proposal. I want to know details of the image and your ideas concerning it. My idea of a collaborative work is one that is produced on an equal basis. Your idea just seems a little too convenient and I must say a little patronising as well. I want to know more about your telepathy idea as I am concerned about its reference to romantic ideas surrounding Aborigines (it belongs in Crocodile Dundee). (By the way I was driving through the central desert between Yuendumu and Papunya at 1.30pm 27 July.) If we can't come to some agreement on an equal basis than I suggest we forget about the whole idea and the exhibition — the rush for the catalogue publication is not a concern and is only a fault of the organisers of this exhibition; a blank page would suit me. Your suggestion requires a tremendous amount of trust (or gullibility) on my part so please forgive me if my fears are unfounded but the fact remains that I don't know you... Yours sincerely, G. Bennett.*

I then sent a fax to Gordon with some details of the inadvertent references his *The nine ricochets* made to other works of mine — as I outlined above — and also the image that I believe he had telepathically nominated for our collaboration. However, Gordon was not content with a purely telepathic role — not amenable to my idea of a collaboration where "collaboration" can be carried out without the conscious knowledge or indeed volition of the other party. But he did want to collaborate. So he came up with an alternative idea of his own which assembled several elements into the form of an installation. These included the faxed correspondence between us which documented the involved process of negotiation in which we had both participated, a shadow version on canvasboards of

the image I had faxed to him and a stack of blank canvasboard panels — a bold act of appropriation.

For my part I went ahead with the image which I believed had been transmitted to me by Gordon — or had I like Sigmar Polke been Commanded by Higher Beings? — albeit with some minor additions and alterations and I called it, rather stubbornly: *PAINTING FOR CLOSED EYES; AN EXPERIMENT IN THOUGHT TRANSFERENCE FROM AN IMAGE RECEIVED TELEPATHICALLY FROM GORDON BENNETT AT 1.30PM ON JULY 27, 1993.*

*Imants Tillers represented Australia in the 1986 Venice Biennale. In 1993 he won first prize at the Osaka Triennale.*

This is an edited version of a paper Tillers delivered at the forum *We've all been framed* at Artspace, Sydney, on 23 April 1994.

1. The *Commitments* exhibition presented "works by artists from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds who have worked collaboratively to create artworks, to break down/through existing boundaries to create new frames of reference". It was curated by Marshall Bell, Henrietta Fourmile, Marcia Langton and Nicholas Tsoutas and organised by the Institute of Modern Art. The exhibition was shown at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 9 September-2 October 1993; University of Southern Queensland, 15 October-5 November 1993; Artspace, Sydney, 15 April-28 May 1994; and the Canberra School of Art Gallery, 10 June-2 July 1994.

2. Contrary to popular opinion, this was not the first image I had "appropriated" from an Aboriginal artist. The first was an untitled painting by Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa, which had been reproduced in the 1983 book *Papunya: Aboriginal painting from the Central Desert*. It is possible to detect traces of this image in the underlayer of my second canvasboard painting *Spirit of place* (1983).

3. Eugenio Dittborn "Du carton des impressionistes: notes for a small genealogy of the canvasboard in the pictorial work of Imants Tillers" *Imants Tillers: jump* Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney, 1994. np.

4. Rene Daumal *The lie of the truth* Hanuman Books, Madras and New York, 1989. p7.

5. Juan Davila "Aboriginality: a lugubrious game?" *Art and text* 23/24 March-May 1987. p54.

6. Imants Tillers "Locality fails" *Art and text* 6 Winter 1982. p51.

7. Rex Butler "Two readings of Gordon Bennett's *The nine ricochets*" *Eyeline* 19 Winter/Spring 1992. p22.

8. Juan Davila op cit. p55.

9. Bob Lingard "Interview with Gordon Bennett" *Tension* 17 1989. p39.

10. Alison Carroll "Gordon Bennett" *Möet and Chandon touring exhibition catalogue* 1991, Möet and Chandon Australian Art Foundation, Melbourne, 1991. p9.

11. Quoted in Eric Michaels "Postmodernism: a consideration of the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery" *Forum Papers*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 1989. p26.

12. As a diasporic Latvian it was natural for me to quote such a source. Furthermore, for an Latvian it would be instantly recognisable as a Jaunsudrabin rather than a Tillers.

13. I actually made a copy of this gnostic symbol — from p400 of Carl Jung's *Psychology and alchemy* — in 1982 as part of a series of works called "Suppressed imagery". This pencil on canvasboard panel was then recycled in December 1983 as part of the underlayer for *Pataphysical man*.

14. Reported in the *Sydney Daily mirror* newspaper in 1989.

15. Rex Butler, op cit. p20.