

via PARADISO

An Interview with Imants Tillers by Jennifer Slatyer

JS: *Paradiso* is the third and final painting in your epic *Diaspora Trilogy* and forms the centrepiece of this exhibition at Karyn Lovegrove Gallery in Melbourne. It is identical in size and format to its predecessors, *Diaspora* 1992 and *Izkliede* (Latvian for 'diaspora') 1994, being composed of 48 small paintings which can be displayed either as unique objects to constitute an entire exhibition, or mounted together to form a single, monumental work (approx. 300 x 900 cm). These three works will provide the focus for your forthcoming exhibition at the Pori Art Museum in Finland in June this year, *Diaspora in Context: Connections in a Fragmented World*. Was the Pori show in any way a catalyst for the creation of *Paradiso* and the completion of this cycle of paintings?

IT: Indeed it was. But in a sense external constraints - suddenly imposed limitations - stimulated the production of all three works. For example, *Diaspora* was conceived when I was in Riga in 1991, just after Latvia's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, and the National Museum of Art invited me to do an exhibition there. The space I was offered with fixed wooden partitions arranged in parallel bays, unchanged since 1905, while suitable for small-scale easel paintings, was quite unsuitable for my work. So I devised the two-fold structure of *Diaspora* which you mentioned (and which I have used ever since) and the work fitted perfectly into this rather archaic though beautiful space. Elsewhere it could still be shown in its monolithic form (as it was at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in March 1994).

It was in Riga, while installing the exhibition of *Diaspora* in April 1993, that I had the idea to do a second piece of the same magnitude for an Australian audience, originating as it were from Riga itself. This became *Izkliede*.

For the exhibition in Pori it would have been ideal to include both *Diaspora* and *Izkliede*, but *Izkliede* by this stage was already committed to being part of the *Antipodean Currents* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York which was then scheduled for precisely the same date as my Pori show and therefore

definitely unavailable. So I had a good incentive to speed up my work on the third painting, *Paradiso*, so it could accompany *Diaspora* to Pori. Incidentally, from April 1994 until it was almost complete in December, this work was in fact called *Paradise*. I changed the 'e' of paradise to the 'o' of paradiso when I realised that it formed an anagram of the word 'diaspora'.

The concept of the exhibition *Diaspora in Context* was the idea of Marketta Seppala, the director of the Pori Art Museum. Originally she wanted to show my work *Diaspora* with the complete set of original Beuys, McCahons, Baselitzes, Kelleys, Roerichs, de Chiricos and so on from which it quotes as a demonstration of the relationship between the source and its manifestation in my painting. This turned out to be a very ambitious and difficult undertaking, highlighting the structures of power, hierarchy, value and protocol which operate within the art world and the disadvantages faced by the peripheries. But obstacles and difficulties can sometimes turn out to produce unexpected advantages too. *Paradiso* was able to compensate for some of the unsuccessful loan requests by incorporating additional sources such as Baselitz's *The Poet* 1965 and Roerich's *Madonna Laboris* 1936 which were available. And while this exhibition was still being prepared, two of the original participants with Beuys in his 1966 *Manresa Aktion* which is a crucial source for *Diaspora*, Henning Christiansen and Bjorn Norgaard, were in the process of restaging this important performance in Manresa itself (November 1994). We are currently waiting to hear if they have accepted Marketta's invitation to restage it as part of *Diaspora in Context* in Pori and in Sydney when the exhibition comes to the Museum of Contemporary Art in September this year.

JS: In *Izkliede*, and even more so in *Paradiso*, there is a notable intensification in the complexity of the rich network of visual and textual references that we find first in *Diaspora*. The viewer can also detect a changing relationship amongst the sources, moving away from the strictly art-world, or primary, sources to encompass a secondary layer of more esoteric, autobiographical or anecdotal references from

the real world. Can you describe the process by which these multifarious sources are superimposed and juxtaposed to form an increasingly dense image field?

IT: With the new visual structure of *Diaspora* I seem to have also discovered a new and immense space of possibilities with regard to both sources and their interrelationships within a painting resulting in a veritable explosion of sources. Whereas I had quoted from a total of about 200 different artists in over 400 works produced between 1981 and 1992, *Paradiso* alone encodes information from more than 30 different art sources including works by well-known artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, Sidney Nolan, Jackson Pollock, Lawrence Weiner, Jannis Kounellis and lesser-known artists like Tess Edwards, Julian Dashper, Stranger 29 or Unto Pusa. But more importantly, it also encodes information from everyday (quotidian) sources, like the postcard sent to me by Eugenio Dittborn, local graffiti ("Abo Boys"), a wine label ("Faith Shiraz"), a newspaper caption ("Tragedy unfolds") and images or text from photographs I have been taking since 1991. These record the kinds of commonplace signs, minor objects and subtle phenomena that are all around me in my local precinct but that normally pass unnoticed. I have always been interested in the resonance of these things with the imagery and content of my paintings, but had not found a way using them more directly as I have now. Perhaps these things have entered my work as a result of my dutiful repetition of Beuys' litany:

Here Speaks Fluxus/Fluxus

Here Speaks Fluxus/Fluxus

Now element 2 has climbed up to element 1.

Now element 1 has climbed down to element 2.

Now element 2 has climbed up to element 1.

Now element 1 has climbed down to element 2.

Repeat, repeat, etc.

Before *Diaspora* I often employed the wholesale borrowing of discreet images by Jackson Pollock, Giorgio de Chirico, Colin McCahon, etc. so there was no need to think too much about *composition*. The composition of my image inevitably resembled that of its source, leaving me free to think about other issues of structure, media, scale and surface, etc. But now composition has become the major issue. With all my work now, each painting evolves into a final state that I cannot predict at the outset. It is like Turing's 'unpredictability theorem' with regard to computer software - the only way to find out how a given program works is to actually run it through. Turing proved mathematically that it is impossible to predict all the outcomes in advance. There will always be at least one more outcome that was not predicted.

So too, with my works now, I begin with a general unformed theme (for example, 'diaspora' or 'paradise') or perhaps a title (for example, *Partition of Place, How I Found Grace, Drift of Destiny*) and sketch out a preliminary plan for how it might develop. The final composition is not predetermined, but evolves organically as the work is executed. New elements can always be added at short notice and existing elements discarded and abandoned. In a sense the trajectory of the work changes as each new element is accommodated by the whole. In a sense, what was always present in my canvasboard oeuvre *as a whole* is now visible within a single work.

JS: You have used various different models in the past such as Systems Theory, the *Book of Power*, *ONE PAINTING* to explain your canvasboard project, its web of dense interconnections and the relationship of the parts to the whole. Your latest discovery, however, has been that of a scientific model for your process which extends earlier analogies with Systems Theory into the domain of 'complex adaptive systems' which are at the core of the recent emergence of Complexity Theory.

IT: I would like to answer this question by going back to the beginning of the canvasboard project. It was in 1981 that I started making paintings composed of many canvasboard panels. The typical panel size is 10" x 15" and a given painting consists of a number of these panels (say anything between 3 and 300) assembled together in a rectangular format like a mosaic to form a single image. However, I also consider each of these paintings to be part of a single 'unbroken wholeness' which I have called *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 (42,002 panels completed so far) 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 as it were, to form discrete paintings on the wall for a time, and then in turn these larger paintings would break down into their individual components and become part of the stack once more. This continual movement of panels - the endless cycle of constitution, dispersion, reconstitution and so on - is fundamental to my work.

And what is encoded in these paintings is visual and now verbal information derived largely from art world sources forming a kind of idiosyncratic, closed (though rapidly expanding) system of reference and interconnection. In 1992, with *Diaspora*, *ONE PAINTING* reached a kind of 'critical mass' where it transformed itself into a new state such that the metaphors of Complexity Theory - 'spontaneous self-organization', 'adaption', 'co-evolution', 'autocatalytic sets', 'emergence', 'the edge of chaos' now seem an appropriate, indeed ideal, means of explaining the process. The growing autonomy of the work of art - its independence from its author and creator - increasingly casts me in the role of information-gatherer, analyst, observer and commentator as it heads off on its own trajectory.

JS: Earlier, you referred to your individual works as "beginning with an unformed theme...or perhaps (simply) a title". Clearly both *Diaspora* and *Izkliede* engage with a common theme - the "migrant epic". What about *Paradiso*?

IT: A crucial element in *Paradiso* is the amendment I have made to a line from Joseph Beuys' *Manresa Aktion*: 'Good day, where are you going? Thorvaldsen Museum'. In *Paradiso* it becomes: 'Good day, where are you going? To paradise'.

While working on *Paradiso* I discovered in Jonas Mekas' book *I had nowhere to go 1994*, a vivid and moving account of how he was forced to leave his native land (Lithuania) like many other Balts during World War II. He relates his subsequent experiences in a Nazi forced labour camp and then after the war, like many others, the displaced persons camps and then eventual resettlement in a foreign country. In *Paradiso* I have quoted these words:

We are dreaming bread and liberty
We'll dream the same when we die
Hungry, imprisoned, enslaved
And scattered across the face of the earth.

In such dismal circumstances thoughts of paradise abound: 'I'd like to know what a twentieth century man would do in paradise, a paradise as we find described in the old books'.

Later, when faced with the prospect of emigration to America, he writes: 'A Lithuanian cannot live without nature. You can't detach him from the wide, green fields, from the brooks, the snow, the cobwebs flying through the air in late September, from his forests, fragrant with moss and berries...'

Dimitri Tsaloumas, the Australian writer has used his personal experience of migration from a Greek homeland to also face those enduring questions which know no international borders: 'Tell me. Where in geography is this land? Why am I here?'

I completed *Paradiso* in December 1994 and immediately went to Tasmania on holidays with my family. We arrived in Hobart and then headed north to Cradle Mountain National Park and the village of Moina where we would stay that night. It was the 20th December. Close to Moina while studying the map, I noticed a place called Paradise. So we took a detour via Paradise. It was the kind of place Jonas Mekas might have liked. I took some notes there:

Features of Paradise: Not a settlement, no notable centre, no distinguishing features. Beautifully gently rolling hills, lush pastoral creek flats, large tracts of uncleared land. It was dairy country with views of high mountains. Also home to a deer park - PARADISE PARK. At one point there was a solitary signpost which had painted on *both* sides the word "PARADISE". So one could pass through Paradise without realising it. A sense of peace in Paradise, a pleasant, brief detour on the way to somewhere else...(Tillers 1994)



Paradise, Tasmania (Photo: Imants Tillers, December 1994)