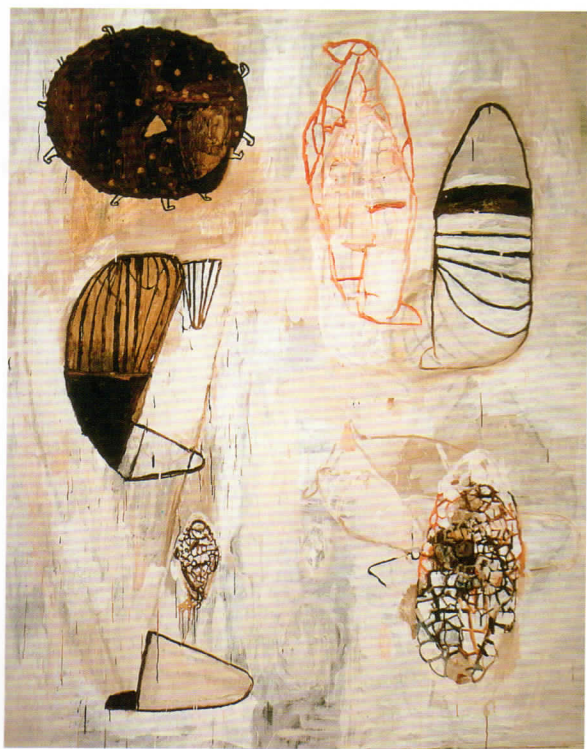
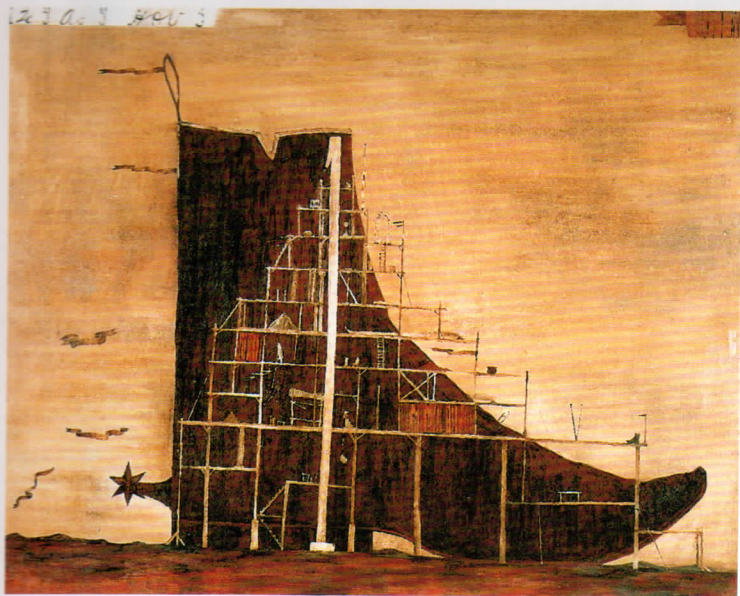


# Shane Cotton

Imants Tillers

**'Today is today everywhere'** **Lawrence Weiner**

In today's world of accelerating globalisation, questions of identity seem to loom large. So when Robert Leonard asked me as an Australian artist (or is it as a Latvian–Australian?) to write about the work of Shane Cotton, a contemporary Maori artist, I was reminded of the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor's phrase: 'impressive perversity'<sup>1</sup>! But perhaps Leonard simply wanted a different point of view on the small, talented and powerful group of artists of Maori origin who, as a consequence of being educated in the European art school tradition, 'are bringing Maori and Western imagery together in surprising and idiosyncratic combinations'.<sup>1</sup>



top: SHANE COTTON, *Te Ao Hou*, 1993, oil on canvas, 122 x 152.5 cm;  
 above: *Celestial Nets*, 1991, oil on canvas, 183 x 152 cm.

But first a little geographic point. Because of Australia's vast size and New Zealand's relative proximity to Australia's east coast, cities like Auckland or Wellington are closer to Sydney and Melbourne than are Perth or Darwin, which lie on Australia's western and northern extremities. Despite significant diasporic populations of both Maori and Pakeha (white) New Zealanders in Australia, there seems to have been very little *cultural* traffic across the Tasman Sea until recently. It is as though Australia and New Zealand were located *precisely* in each other's blind spot. And when they do notice each other, it is often with an attitude of benign disregard.

For example, in 1978, when the New Zealand Government presented a work by New Zealand's greatest artist, Colin McCahon, to the people of Australia, their prime minister of the day (no fan of McCahon) was known to be privately delighted that Australia was getting such a 'dud' work. *Victory Over Death II*, 1970, is a large, austere, bleak canvas, unstretched and thinly painted in black and white, with text, mainly biblical, inscribed on it in an untidy hand, yet it is one of McCahon's greatest works. At the National Gallery of Australia it hangs in the company of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* and is not diminished by the comparison. I doubt that Terry Smith could have written his ambiguous and contentious essay on Australian art, 'The Provincialism Problem', for *Artforum* in 1974 had he been more aware of New Zealand culture – for surely McCahon would have leapt out as the *one* exception that disproves the ubiquitous rule of provincialism.

Nevertheless, Australia and New Zealand have close economic and political ties. They also share a common legacy as post-colonial settler societies with an unresolved connection to the same founding 'mother-country' (England) and an awareness of the dispossession of their indigenous peoples. This awareness is only recent in Australia – for a long time there was a near complete exclusion of the Aboriginal people and their culture from the Australian consciousness, with the frontier conflict and the impact of settlement having been systematically expunged from the national histories. The anthropologist W.C.H. Stanner called it 'The Great Australian Silence'. Today the unresolved histories of both countries continue to destabilise their coming of age and the rightfulness of their inheritance.

In this context, the paintings of Shane Cotton are opportune. A part-Maori born in 1964 who enjoyed 'a normal New Zealand upbringing', he is now involved in a kind of detailed retrieval of his Maori heritage and the painful history that goes with it. Cotton has noted: 'being Maori has always been important to me. However, trying to bring this into my work proved difficult, especially at art school where such things could never be addressed because there was no knowledge to guide you.' Since completing art school in 1988 Cotton has been on a steep learning curve and indeed now teaches at a centre for Maori studies. A key experience for Cotton was visiting 'Rongopai', a Maori meeting house near Gisborne. There he realised that Maori had been borrowing imagery (and technology) from their British colonisers since first contact – incorporating motifs like trains and ships, and decorative motifs based on flowers and bird life into their own designs – and that the boundaries between

Maori and Pakeha culture had thus always been transmutable. Cotton continues this tradition of transmutability by combining his Maori influences with, for example, his reinterpretation of early colonial renderings of the New Zealand landscape by the early European explorers. Typically he complicates these juxtapositions with additional elements, some drawn from contemporary art or life.

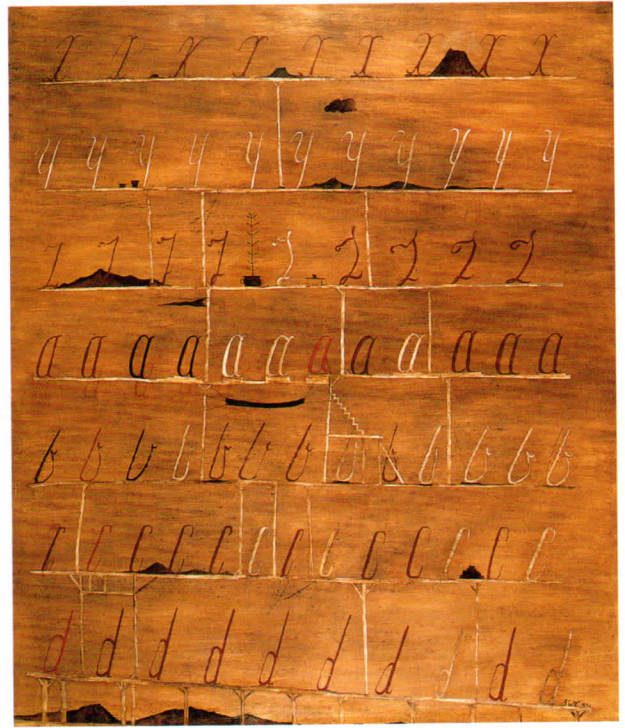
What is distinctive in Cotton's work are the visual structures he employs to contain these references and quotations. The rendering of the multitude of elements he assembles is very flat and his pictures are unified by the use of a limited, almost subdued palette of blacks, whites, brown ochres and red ochres. The paint is applied with a casual virtuosity. Cotton often uses the conceit of containment within his paintings. Objects are stacked within shelves or set within different kinds of bounded spaces. This internal framing device allows Cotton to play with the scale of his pictorial elements – juxtaposing large pots, for example, with tiny landscape vistas. This strange internal logic gives his paintings a grammatical quality, and also suggests that each painting is but a step in the compilation of a kind of encyclopedic image bank, formed by the totality of his works.

When Cotton's divided formats enclose panoramic landscapes his

works recall such paintings by McCahon as *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*, 1950, and *Te Tangi o te Pīpiwhararua (The Song of the Shining Cuckoo) A Poem by Tangirau Hotere*, 1974. But in works such as *Daze*, 1994, Cotton takes his frames/shelves (and the lava lamps as well) from the neo-Pop work of American Haim Steinbach. Indeed, Cotton finds a multitude of ways of containing and arranging content: stacked pou-pou style, in trees, in pots, stuck into pincushions, balanced on scaffolds, strewn across flat landscapes, resting on the top of Walteresque *koru*s (as though they were shelves or landscapes). Cotton's visual ingenuity seems inexhaustible. The awakening of Maori consciousness and methodology combine to expand the possibilities exponentially, so that things Maori can be found in the most unlikely places – even in the Salvador Dali melted clock! The process of appropriation or quotation is the key to Cotton's boundless energy. Not because elements are re-presented wholesale or synthesised to form a new coherent whole, but rather because they are taken as fragments or particles for reincorporation or rearrangement in a loosely ordered, even chaotic structure. The result is a kind of complexity, finely balanced on the edge of order and chaos.

Cotton is also indebted to the work of the American painter Terry Winters. Before Cotton discovered how to use his Maori heritage his

**Cotton often uses the conceit of containment within his paintings. Objects are stacked within shelves or set within different kinds of bounded spaces. This internal framing device allows Cotton to play with the scale of his pictorial elements ...**



SHANE COTTON, *Daze*, 1994, oil on canvas, 152 x 183 cm; right: *X-D*, 1994, oil on canvas, 216.3 x 151 cm. Collection Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.

paintings were 'visceral, organic works, blobby, biomorphic shapes resembling seedpods, diatoms, single-cell organisms floating in fields of colour.'<sup>2</sup> Around 1993 he realised he could substitute an inventory of cultural forms and artifacts for this natural set. Cotton's works are always credible as *paintings* in a way that those of his Australian counterpart Gordon Bennett are sometimes not. What Cotton has taken from Winters is not only a similar repertoire of natural forms but Winters's adept handling of paint, his versatility in laying down pigment (as in the work of the Abstract Expressionists) in such a way that calls attention to his paintings as 'real-world objects'. Where Winters's motifs are 'subjected to the painting process and are broken down to the raw fact of pigment, their legibility erased to partially re-emerge', Cotton's motifs are pushed to extremes of ambiguity within intricate grounds of subdivision, ornamentation or decoration. In both Winters and Cotton there is a kind of 'wobble between material chaos, abstract pattern (or structure) and identifiable form'.<sup>3</sup> Cotton also benefits from the legacy of McCahon in this respect, for despite the rough, untutored appearance of his paintings, McCahon was a consummate virtuoso in the laying down of paint.

The biological and ecological connotations of Cotton's early work also suggest biologist Stuart Kauffman's postulation of 'autocatalysis' as the process which might have kick-started life on earth.<sup>4</sup> As I understand this theory, in a primordial chemical soup, given the right molecules, where some of these molecules act as catalysts for reactions between each other, it is possible that a *coherent, self-reinforcing web of reactions* can be produced so that all the molecules in the web steadily grow more and more abundant relative to molecules that are not part of the web. In this way a web can *catalyse its own formation* and the molecules form an 'autocatalytic set'. The parallel with an artistic practice of visual appropriation or quotation which has the potential to form a self-reinforcing web of relationships seems striking.

As in the autocatalytic set, the choice of specific images and their ability to react with and reinforce each other would be the crucial factor. Is this what we see in Cotton's work? And why is appropriation or quotation so necessary for its generation? It is because it is nothing less than a mapping procedure which links pre-existing images or even image banks into a web or network of connections. Where the American 'appropria-

tion art' of Sherrie Levine, David Salle, Mike Bidlo and Richard Prince was a one-dimensional and reductive 'end-game' strategy which has since died quietly, appropriation and quotation continue to thrive in the Antipodes because these practices are based on different imperatives and a more complex model. What distinguishes Cotton's oeuvre from that of his American precursors is that it is not based on a 'representational' system but rather on a 'connectionist' one.

There is a vast quantity of visual and verbal signifiers in Cotton's fledgling oeuvre and it is the interconnectedness of the elements and the density of the connections that allows something new to emerge – something that is greater than the simple sum of its parts. This is a methodology I have used in my own work.

Robert Leonard has also observed the process by which Cotton's work has developed over the last five years and found it to be like:

life starting out of simple codes and yet becoming increasingly complex and diverse. The first few shows of the new work were very classical, programmatic, each work seeming clear and discrete, each work making a new point, its own point. Subsequent shows became increasingly baroque, mixing styles and imagery wildly. Shane getting lost in the generative flow and web of the work. There's something sort of scholastic about them now, as if they have been energised by their accumulating density.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike many of his Australian and New Zealand contemporaries, Cotton resists the temptation to speak in the new international art language of the 1990s. We are all familiar with it even though it may have been difficult to characterise until now.

Gerardo Mosquera has noted that this language, rooted in minimalism and conceptualism, is 'based on the idea of installing diverse significant components which range from monitors, objects and appropriated images to sounds and living beings that are interrelated within a space'.<sup>6</sup> And he notes that the author of this new art is 'like a postmodern nomad who in an allegory for the processes of globalisation is in constant movement from one international exhibition to another, whose baggage is packed with the elements for future works or the tools to realise them *in situ*'. This new, globally mobile, diasporic artist (like a latter-day Daniel Buren) lives and works *in situ* – more executive or engineer than artisan. And as Mosquera notes, 'never has painting had a lesser weight within the circles that legitimate art', yet in this



above: SHANE COTTON, *Rangihaketini*, 1998, oil on three canvases, each 56 x 101 cm; right: *Viewed*, 1997, oil on canvas, 183 x 168 cm. Collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



hostile international climate Cotton makes a new case for painting.

Cotton's most recent works, such as *Kenehi III*, 1998, are dominated by Maori text which again (this time ironically) recall particular works by McCahon. One could speak of McCahon's works *The Canoe Tainui*, 1969, or *The Lark's Song (A Poem by Matire Kereama)*, 1969, which appropriate from Maori culture and language as premonitions for the reinvention and reconfiguration of Maori art which we find in Cotton, but also in Michael Parekowhai, Brett Graham and Peter Robinson. Alternatively, we can see this as an example of the culture of the invader contaminated by the culture they have colonised. Cotton's words name places, recite genealogies, allude to historical or biblical narrative. To the uninitiated observer the works' references and meanings seem to be with-

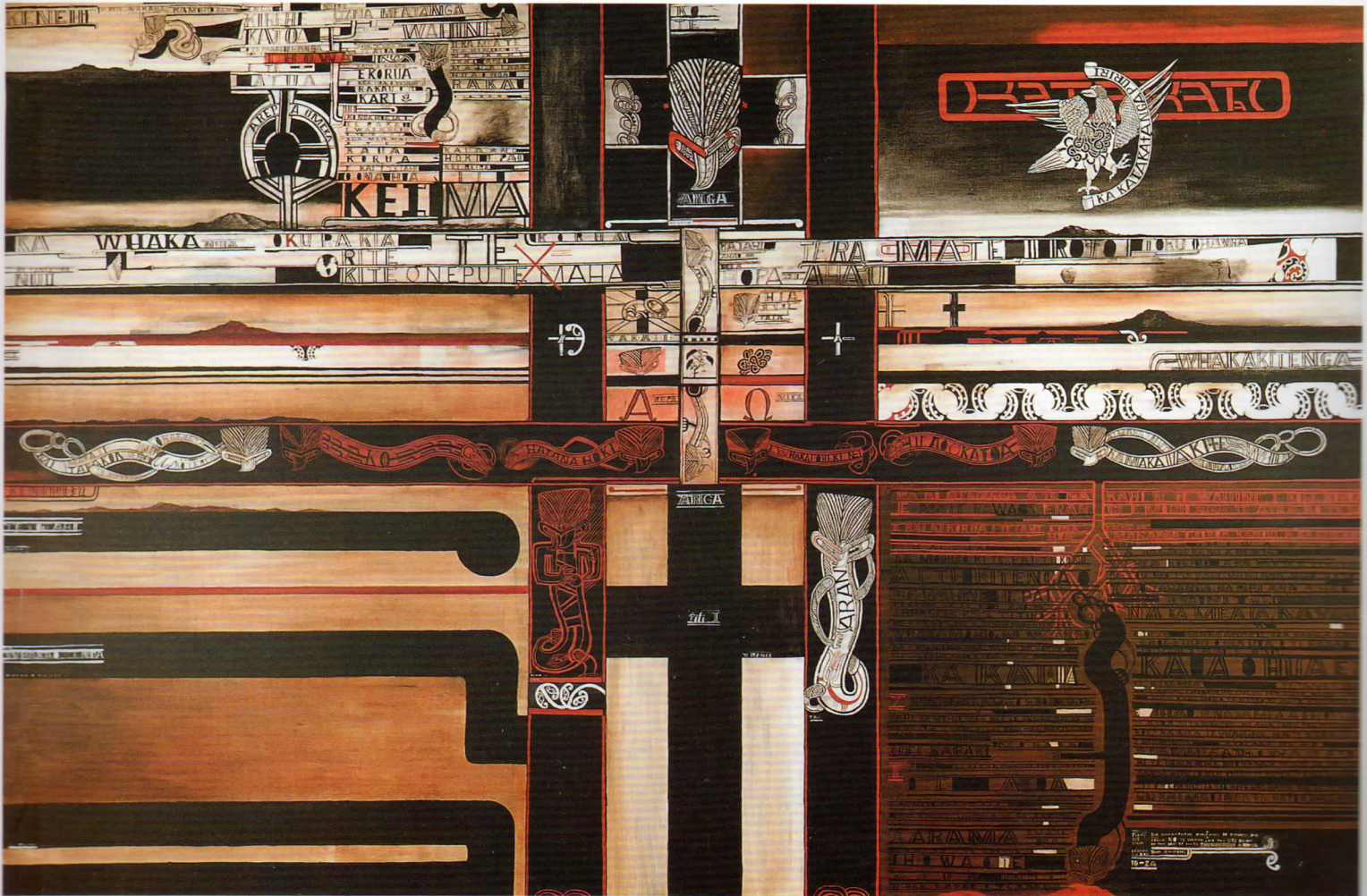
held and inaccessible, not unlike those in much Aboriginal art. But like Aboriginal works, these works are eventually revealed to be titles to ownership of land – painting and politics become one.

We are led to ask whether Cotton in these works is waging his own version of a *jihad* – the Arabic word for a just war. He seems to have put aside his previous strategy of hybridisation to make a personal case for the re-tribalisation of the world. Perhaps we have to surmise that Cotton is no longer mimicking the world of the 'Other' and accept that he now really belongs to it. Whatever the case, his work sat very comfortably next to the paintings of the Aboriginal artist Kathleen Petyarre (who hails from Mosquito Bore near Utopia in Australia's Northern Territory) in the recent Seppelt Art Awards at the Museum of Contemporary Art in

---

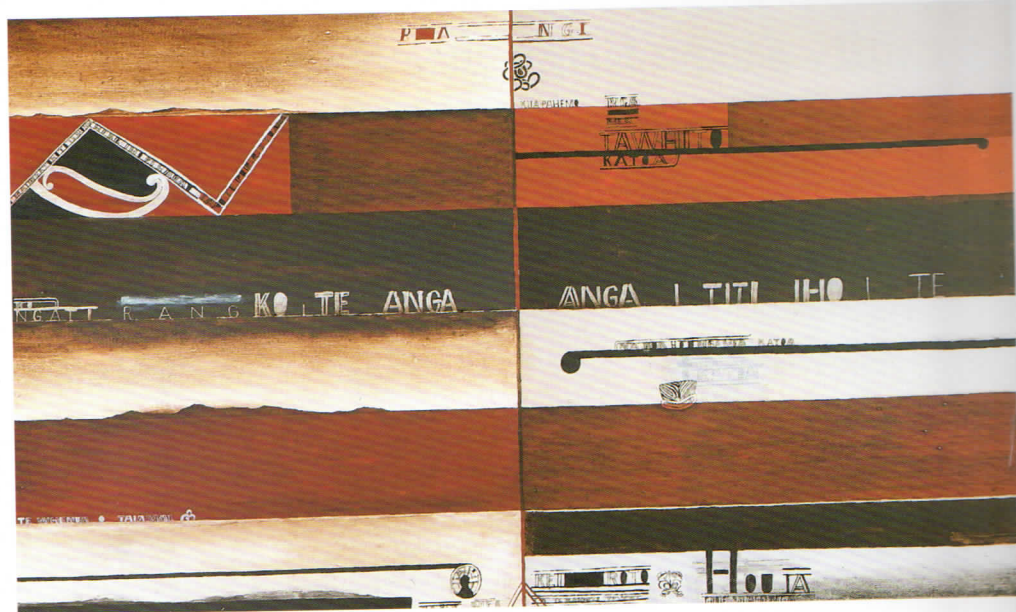
**the 'world' Cotton responds to ... is not an independently existing reality ... but rather one that he is in the process of bringing forth again and again through his personal and private acts of cognition.**

---



above: SHANE COTTON, *Heke III*, 1998, oil on canvas, 91 x 152 cm, courtesy Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland. Photograph John Pettitt; opposite: *Kenehi III*, 1998, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.

Sydney. There are, in fact, many artists today dealing with questions of identity but with simpler and more accessible strategies. One thinks of artists like Xu Bing, who invents a fictional Chinese calligraphy and revels in the process of cultural mistranslation; or the American Ellen Gallagher, who gently contaminates her luscious minimal paintings with the insidious and unsettling ciphers of racism; or the Australian Tracey Moffatt, who stages fictional narratives that subvert our expectations of the relationship of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal. But in the case of both Cotton and Petyarre they seem to bring forth entirely alien worlds. Here the consequences of globalisation appear to run counter to the homogenisation taking place elsewhere. Polarisation rules.



Rex Butler has recently written about the impossibility of discovering the 'truth' in the work of Aboriginal artists like Emily Kngwarreye (and Petyarre) who have an entirely different world view from the European one.<sup>7</sup> I would like to propose that these world views need not be competing or mutually exclusive if we dispense with the idea of 'representation'. The cognitive science of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela could help us out of this apparent impasse. The central insight of their theory (the Santiago theory) is the identification of cognition – the process of knowing – with the process of life. This represents a radical expansion of the concept of mind. According to the Santiago theory the brain is not necessary for the mind to exist – a bacterium or a plant has no brain but has a mind. The simplest organism is capable of perception and thus of cognition. In the new concept of cognition, the process of knowing is thus much broader than that of thinking: it involves perception, emotion and action – the entire process of life. According to Fritjoff Capra, who expounds this theory in his book *The Web of Life*, a remarkable consequence of their approach is that it takes issue with the idea that cognition is a *representation* of an independently existing world.<sup>8</sup> Rather than being a representation of an independent, pre-given world, it is the 'bringing forth of a world'. What is brought forth by a particular organism in the process of living is not *the* world but *a* world, one that is dependent on the organism's structure. Since individual organisms within a species have more or less the same structure, they bring forth similar worlds. With many different organisms we have an ecology of worlds brought forth by mutually coherent acts of cognition. The authors of the Santiago theory do not assert that 'nothing exists': they assert that there are no objectively existing structures; there is no pre-given territory of which we can make a map – the map-making itself brings forth the features of the territory. Surely this explains to us why the 'Dreamings' of tribal Aborigines (in order to *continue* the world) are so important to their culture.

Hence the key to Cotton's work is not the polemic which surrounds it

but rather the cognitive process enacted by it. Thus each painting is a kind of dynamic system or network of sources interacting with Cotton's personal subjectivity in which his perception and action become inseparable. The delimited canvas is the arena for this drama and the finished painting the frozen evidence. Thus the 'world' Cotton responds to – of, say, majestic mountains in the Antipodes, intricate carvings, Maori place names, of genealogy, of Polynesian gods, artifacts, modern consumer culture, historic injustices, invasions, maps, wars, diasporas, Christian signs, digital clocks, the paintings of McCahon, Walters, Hotere (or Tillers), land claims, rebirths, and so on – is not an independently existing reality, an independent pre-given world, but rather one that he is in the process of bringing forth again and again through his personal and private acts of cognition. And he does this through the act of painting.

- 1 Jim Barr & Mary Barr, 'Mana from History', *World Art*, no. 15, 1998, p. 58.
- 2 David Eggleton, 'History Under Canvas', *Listener*, New Zealand, 12 December 1998, p. 36.
- 3 Prudence Carlson, 'Terry Winters', in *Art of Our Time: The Saatchi collection*, Lund Humphries, London, 1984, vol. 4, p. 30.
- 4 Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The search for the laws of complexity*, Penguin, New York, 1996, pp. 61–6.
- 5 Letter from Robert Leonard to the author, 23 January 1999.
- 6 Gerardo Mosquera, 'America', in *Five Continents and a City*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Mexico City, 1998, p. 93.
- 7 Rex Butler, 'Emily Kame Kngwarreye and the Undeconstructible Space of Justice', *eyeline*, Brisbane, no. 36, autumn/winter 1998.
- 8 Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*, HarperCollins, London, 1996, pp. 259–65.

Images courtesy the artist.

Imants Tillers is an Australian artist who lives in Cooma.