

**Prism**  
**Contemporary art in Australia, or**  
**Whatever happened to Australian art after the Aboriginal art revolution?**

Christine Nicholls

*It is impossible today for any Australian artist not to take Aboriginal art into account, into serious consideration. Even if they're not making direct or overt reference to Aboriginal art [non-Indigenous] Australian artists have got to be aware of it. I agree [with your proposition] — Aboriginal art has now definitely moved into the contemporary mainstream. Aboriginal art is what's unique about Australia, in visual arts terms. Indigenous art is more powerful than anything else in the world at present [in terms of contemporary visual art]. We have a unique situation in Australia.<sup>1</sup>*

Imants Tillers, 28 May 2006

### Introduction

This exhibition begins and ends with the premise that, in terms of contemporary Australian visual art, Aboriginal art has become the mainstream,<sup>2</sup> and is widely perceived as such both in Australia and abroad. Indigenous Australian visual art may be described as the 'default position'<sup>3</sup> to which assessments of the current status of Australian art must inevitably revert. The situation has been thus for more than a decade now, and is especially evident when the international gaze turns upon Australian visual art. Australian Indigenous art's hegemony within the national and international spheres, so generously acknowledged in the above quotation by Imants Tillers — himself recognized for at least two decades now as one of Australia's leading contemporary artists — is borne out not only in economic terms, but also in terms of recognition, respect, and widespread perceptions, both national and international, that Indigenous art holds the frontline position in contemporary Australian art.<sup>4</sup>

Such recognition of the hegemonic status of Aboriginal art in Australia is not the exclusive preserve of people involved in what Australians are increasingly describing as 'the arts industry'. In her opening speech at a recent Pitjatjantjara art exhibition at Adelaide's prestigious Festival Centre, Senator Amanda Vanstone, a senior figure in Australia's federal government, described contemporary Aboriginal art as 'Australia's greatest cultural gift to the world'.<sup>5</sup>

The enormous degree to which Aboriginal art has influenced our understanding of the world needs to be emphasized. Australians of European heritage, like myself, have had our eyes well and truly opened by contemporary Aboriginal artists; they have shown us how to 'see' this country in completely different ways from our Anglo-European forebears. Surely it is the prerogative of only truly great artists to open the eyes of others onto their world?

Great Arnhem Land artists like John Mawurndjul, whose sublime work *Billabong at Milmilngkan*, with its delicate, distinctive cross-hatched designs, evokes his beloved ancestral homeland in northern Australia, and the astonishing *Gungura (Wind Dreaming)* of his younger

countryman Samuel Namunjda, reveal a way of understanding one part of the Australian landscape.<sup>6</sup>

Kija artist Rover Thomas, from the Kimberley region in Western Australia, with his expansive ochre works deriving from *Krill Krill* ceremonies in which topographical information is condensed into large blocs of a single colour bounded by lines of dots, shows us another. When Rover Thomas first quite unexpectedly came across Mark Rothko's work, he reportedly asked his companion: 'Who's that bugger who paints like me?'<sup>7</sup> Thomas is represented in this exhibition by a figurative work, *The Story of Owl*, and also by his magisterial *Paruku (Lake Gregory)*, a work that surely places this artist among the world's finest. Not far from Rover Thomas's country, Balgo-based Kukatja artist and bold colourist Eubena Nampitjin recreates her Dreamings (represented here by *Kerijiti*) with apparently wild abandon, thrilling us by her daring use of contemporary media — and showing us yet another way of 'seeing country'.

The astonishing fact is that this turn-around in Australia's 'visual arts identity' has happened inside the space of three decades. Moreover, this remarkable achievement has been effected by the most impoverished and disadvantaged group in Australia, who constitute a mere 2% of the total Australian population. Prior to the 1970s, Australian Aboriginal art was regarded, for the most part, within primitivist, anthropological or ethnographic paradigms as quaint exotica, and only rarely viewed as either 'fine' art or 'contemporary' art. So indeed, to describe this *volte-face* in terms of the *status quo ante* of Indigenous art as a 'revolution' is not to overly dramatize or overstate the case. Today, Australian Indigenous art is regarded as *contemporary art* first and foremost because it is being created *now*.

Rightly or wrongly, and harsh as such an evaluation may seem (and with several notable exceptions) beyond Australia's shores non-Indigenous Australian artists, descendants of the migrant groups who now constitute the majority of the Australian population, are still sometimes regarded as 'second-hand Europeans' living in what celebrated Australian poet A.D. Hope once described as a 'robber-state'.<sup>8</sup> This exhibition and this essay in no way endorses a view of non-Indigenous Australian artists as second-hand Europeans nor implies that they are second-rate artists — this is simply not so — but rather, it is premised on the indisputable hegemony of Indigenous art in Australia. Like it or not, when it comes to the international arena, Australian art is almost exclusively perceived as that produced by the Indigenous population.

Like many other Australians, in recent years, a considerable number of non-Indigenous Australian artists have been educated into Indigenous artists' unique 'ways of seeing' and thinking, and this has influenced their collective artistic identity. High profile non-Indigenous Australian artists Imants Tillers, Rosemary Laing, Hossein Valamanesh and Fiona Hall, all represented in *Prism*, have been responsive to In-

digenous art in a range of differing ways, ways that are not always immediately visible. This two-way influence 'translates' into complex visual artworks that to some extent also reflect these artists' own cultural origins — works that have been shaped by artistic traditions geographically — and in some cases, for artists whose families migrated generations ago, historically — located far from Australia. Regardless of whether or not these Australian artists are first generation migrants — like Iranian-born Hossein Valamanesh for example — there is a sense in which all of their artistic identities are hyphenated, as indeed are virtually all Australian identities, today. This serendipitous mix should be viewed as generative, positive and enriching for contemporary Australian art and society generally. Moreover, as Alva Noë has so elegantly put it: 'Artworks direct our attention to the complexity of experience, a complexity that we can easily overlook'.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the non-Indigenous artists included in *Prism*, it is easy to overlook the 'complexity of experience' encrypted in their remarkable artworks, which arises from the complexity of their own identities. So, while only a handful of non-Indigenous Australian artists are represented in *Prism*, nevertheless their work makes a major contribution. Internationally Australia is recognized not only for its unique Aboriginal art, but also for its (for the most part) successful multiculturalism, which has been founded on selective, controlled migration.

The richness and diversity of Indigenous and migrant groups' identities have translated into equally richly diverse Australian artistic practice. It needs to be stated from the outset there are many more Australian artists who are descendants of the successive waves of migrant groups who now populate Australia, whose work is worthy of inclusion in an exhibition such as *Prism*.<sup>10</sup> The fact is that individual — and for that matter group, ethnic or even national — identity necessarily involves an elaborate interplay of self-defined identity and Other-defined (externally defined) identity. That the prerogative for self-definition usually belongs to a greater extent to the rich and the powerful (both people and nations) than to the impoverished and relatively powerless (such as the Australian Aboriginal population), makes the rise and rise of Indigenous Australian art all the more extraordinary. Against all odds, through their artworks, Indigenous artists have claimed the right to self-definition. Furthermore, those identities are central to their art. It is impossible to ignore or deny that Australia, as a visual art-producing nation, is now recognized internationally (in other words, predominantly an 'Other-defined' identity) for its Indigenous Australian art. This exhibition is founded on recognition of that impossibility, and respect for the dominant role that Australian Aboriginal art now plays on the international stage.

Hence while the majority of artists represented in *Prism: contemporary art in Australia* are of Indigenous Australian heritage, the non-Indigenous Australian artists represented here are also acknowledged for their major contribution. Whether the 'complexity of experience' that characterizes contemporary Australia is actually discernible in the artworks on display in this exhibition, depends upon the 'prism', or the specific part of the prism through which we, as viewers, are gazing. Inevitably we will bring our own cultural expectations and knowledge — in other words, our unique 'cultural baggage' — to understanding or appreciating these artworks.

Why *Prism*? The title of this exhibition works at several levels. The

most literal meaning is that it is the name of a major work in this exhibition, a work that manifests a number of its most important curatorial themes. A 'prism' is also a crystal form consisting of at least three faces parallel to a single axis. Deriving from an ancient Greek word, the idea of the 'prism' has fascinated artists, scientists and thinkers for centuries. Prisms bend, refract and disperse light — and hence alter form and colour — in a multiplicity of ways that can profoundly affect what the viewer sees, depending on their entry point.

Although explicable in scientific terms, prisms are also rather mysterious. So, what will be revealed when a Japanese audience, for whom the point of entry is so different from that of many Australians, gazes through that prism onto some of Australia's best contemporary visual art?

### Imants Tillers' *Prism*

In aesthetic terms, *Prism*, the work by Imants Tillers from which this exhibition takes its title, is an extraordinarily beguiling and evocative artwork.<sup>11</sup> This work succinctly encapsulates the major curatorial themes of this exhibition. Born in Australia of Latvian parentage, Tillers grew up speaking Latvian as his first language. Tillers articulates his own 'split identity' in the following terms:

As the Australian son of Latvian migrants, in a way the dilemma of identity can never be resolved. When I went to Latvia, I felt far more Australian than Latvian. It's a split identity in a sense — can these issues ever be resolved?

There is a sense in which all of Tillers' artworks are an attempt to piece together, bit by bit, that 'split' identity, to create a whole from the parts. Both in terms of making and display, Tillers' postmodern mosaics are meticulously assembled and equally painstakingly dis-assembled. Deborah Hart, Senior Curator at the National Gallery of Australia, has commented on:

the remarkable system that Tillers has developed for his art. Since 1981 this has involved working on small amateur painters' canvas boards that come together in grid-like structures to form a work. A single work can contain anywhere from three to 300 panels.<sup>12</sup>

*Prism* is no exception. Comprising 165 panels, Tillers has juxtaposed, seemingly enigmatically if not zeugmatically, appropriations of two major artworks from different times and places. On the left is a figure of a German soldier, 'borrowed' by Tillers from the renowned German Expressionist Georg Baselitz. Aptly, the late Australian art historian Joan Kerr described Imants Tillers as 'our Great Appropriator'.<sup>13</sup> Baselitz's tawdry, unkempt, strangely proportioned soldier-figure, painted with big, loose, ostensibly hasty brushwork, first appeared in a 1965 work entitled *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet*. The name Baselitz has given his work, rather than the physical, visual properties of the figure he is representing, is itself an ironic appropriation of the title of a celebrated work by French artist Gustave Courbet. Although formally entitled *La Rencontre (The Meeting, 1854)*, the original realistic, figurative painting is better known as *Bonjour M. Courbet*. Courbet's

*Meeting*, which depicts a gentleman with his manservant greeting a hiker they have met on the road, discloses a good deal about the hierarchical nature of the class and racial structure in France at that time. The outwardly gesturing hand of Courbet's central figure signals, in part, the asymmetry of those relationships.<sup>14</sup>

Tillers' soldier-figure is apparently pointing in the direction of the late Papunya Tula artist Timmy Payungka Japangardi's masterwork, *Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming at Lake Mackay* (1980).<sup>15</sup> It is as if this rather wretched male figure, perhaps an early Australian convict, is nonplussed, possibly even humbled, in the presence of the Japangardi work. This dishevelled man, who in this context could be interpreted as a classic 'Aussie battler', seemingly defers to the greatness of this artwork by extending his hand towards it, directing our attention away from himself and towards this stunning painting.<sup>16</sup>

Strangely enough, and despite the irregularity of its seemingly ill-fitting, disparate, individual elements, this postmodern pastiche results in a visually pleasing combination. The 'sharing of space' by three great artists — Japangardi, Baselitz, and Tillers — across time, place, and differing epistemologies, has resulted in a surprisingly harmonious work. But at the same time there is absolutely no doubt that it is towards the Papunya Tula work that the Baselitz—Tillers figure gesticulates. Despite the disproportionate bulk, even gigantism, of the Baselitz figure in relation to the Papunya work, and the fact that this man can be interpreted as blundering roughshod, though apparently good-naturedly, across the Australian desert (perhaps a metaphor for the colonization process?), ultimately the Japangardi work dominates the space.

In *Prism*, the dis- or mis-placed figure could be interpreted as a metaphor for Tillers himself. Like other great artists, Tillers is able to direct our attention towards what the majority of us are unable to see, thereby encouraging us to open our eyes to the world before us. For two decades or more Tillers has been gesturing in such a manner towards Indigenous art. He has helped create the possibility for us to reappraise our conceptions about what constitutes beauty and truth in terms of artistic representations of Australia. This is a capacity Tillers, a member of the migrant group, holds in common with many Aboriginal artists. It is no coincidence that Tillers' recent work (for example, the *Nature Speaks* series, two examples of which have been included in this exhibition) has moved further and further in the direction of non-naturalistic evocations of the Australian landscape.

Possibly this is a result of Tillers' identification with the displacement of Aboriginal people from their 'country', cultures, and languages:

It may sound preposterous to say this, but I feel empathy for Indigenous identity, growing up as I did with allegiances to a small country of 2 million people. There were also executions, deportations, the Russian language was imposed in the place of Latvian, and people were forced to adopt Russian language and culture. Diaspora occurred and people fled to other places as a result.

Those people who migrated to other countries (like my parents who came to Australia) felt a huge responsibility to keep the language and culture alive, once they'd migrated. Latvian was my first language, the language that I grew up speaking, even though I was born in Australia. I went to

school not speaking any English, and was sent to Saturday school each week to go on learning Latvian.

The other resonance for me — with Aboriginal art, that is — is that Latvia was among the last of the European countries to be Christianized. It retains animistic elements, and that's the prevalent belief system. For example, there exist powerful, animistic ideas about the landscape being alive — there's a relationship there with Aboriginal beliefs about landscape.

In terms of Tillers' oeuvre taken as a whole, *Prism* must be regarded as a highly significant work insofar as it signifies a kind of epiphany on the part of the artist, not only as an artist, but also as an Australian who has opened himself to new 'ways of seeing' by engaging deeply with contemporary Aboriginal art. Equally, in terms of Tillers' own hyphenated identity as the child of 'displaced persons', the sense of existential alienation in the work is telling. In other words, *Prism* represents a critical point along Imants Tillers' own road to Damascus. In the artist's own words:

*Prism* involves the bringing together of two elements. The original figure that I took from Georg Baselitz is supposed to depict a defeated returning German soldier, and he's an abject figure, an image representing defeat and abjection. In the Baselitz work the man is wearing rags, and, with his hand, he's gesturing towards something as he strides along. In my work, *Prism*, the Baselitz figure is pointing towards the Papunya artwork, maybe saying something about it. To me, this abject figure was somehow very Australian, resonant in the Australian context, bringing to mind the early convicts.

The thing that initially attracted me to the Papunya Tula image [of the work entitled *Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming* (1980) by Timmy Payungka Japangardi] is that it's a kind of atomic structure, it's like a huge, amazing crystal, atomically bonded, its perimeter going right to the edge of the canvas, so it's more like an object, it implies an object. This work [*Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming*] was a very important work at the time. My work is called *Prism* because of this Indigenous artwork. It's reminiscent of a prism ... [*Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming*] is also actually a landscape, a landscape that is very self-contained, and that drew me to it, as well ...

When I started working with appropriation in the early '80s, I didn't want to exclude Aboriginal art, although I was mainly appropriating from American, Italian, and German New Expressionists. In terms of Indigenous art, initially most of my 'quotations' were taken from Papunya Tula art and, more recently, from Emily Kam Ngwarrey.<sup>17</sup> These visual quotes were driven by recognition of the stature and importance of contemporary Indigenous Australian art.

In fact, in terms of the content and meaning of *Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming* from a Western Desert and Centralian Indigenous perspective, the parallel drawn between the Timmy Payungka

Japangardi work and a crystal or prism is not too wide of the mark, although Tillers claims to have responded to the Papunya work at a purely visual level.<sup>18</sup>

Japangardi's so-called 'prism' is in fact an iconographic representation of an extremely significant Aboriginal site, Lake Mackay (Wilkinkarra in Japangardi's language, Pintupi). Lake Mackay is a large salt lake that fills with water only about once every ten years. This great, mostly dry, salt-encrusted lake straddles the borders of what are now called Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Warlpiri woman Punayi (Jeannie) Herbert Nungarrayi affectionately describes Lake Mackay in the following terms:

Most of the time it's dry. But when it's filled with water it's really beautiful, like a paradise. There are so many shells, water animals, and waterbirds there hovering around the lake.<sup>19</sup>

In common with a great deal of traditionally oriented Indigenous art, *Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming at Lake Mackay* not only signifies a very specific *place*, but is also a powerful evocation of an inter-connecting web of human and ancestral relationships arising from the foundational Indigenous concept of *Tjukurrpa* ('The Dreaming').<sup>20</sup> The so-called 'molecular structure' or 'atomic bonding' of the putatively crystalline elements, which led to Tillers entitling his work *Prism*, in fact symbolizes Ancestral Beings called *Tingari*. *Tingari* Ancestors can be either men or women. In this case they are men, kangaroo hunters.

Typically, in the iconographic systems of Central and Western Desert Aborigines, *Tingari* are portrayed as more or less concentric roundels interconnected by roughly parallel lines, although there are a number of different conventions used for representing *Tingari*. *Tingari* paintings also make reference to boys' (and sometimes girls') initiation ceremonies, so to some extent this genre falls into the secret-sacred category of Western and Central Desert art. In pre-contact times (that is, before contact with European colonizers), large groups of boys, recently transformed into 'young men' via initiation, embarked on long trips through the desert. Fundamentally, this systematic travelling around 'country' was educational in nature. The roundels are connected in this prismatic, crystalline structure primarily to signify that the men or women (in this case, young men) are co-initiates, a fact that forges powerful new kinship bonds binding them to one another for life. 'Atomic bonding' is therefore an accurate metaphor for the deep connections that exist between the individual *Tingari*, eternally tying them to a powerful group identity based on place, classificatory kinship interconnections, and a non-negotiable set of mutual obligations and responsibilities.

Parenthetically, and in the context of *Prism*, both the artwork and the exhibition, it needs to be noted that the two factors of 'time' and 'place' interact in ways that exert a huge impact on all human and artistic identity. Like people, artworks are always contingent on their historical and temporal context. The personal experience of migration, displacement, and the imperative of coming to terms with Australia's Indigenous art traditions have been powerful forces in the making of Imants Tillers as an artist. *Prism* proclaims such a vision with greater clarity and visual power than Tillers' other works.

In the following section a slight though necessary detour will be made to provide readers with a brief overview of Australian history, in order to contextualize the remainder of the essay and the artworks that have been included in this exhibition.

### A Very Brief History of Australia

At the time of the white invasion of our country, between two and three hundred distinct Aboriginal languages were spoken in this land. The future of even those relatively 'strong' languages is extremely uncertain.

Nungarrayi, Lajamanu 1989.<sup>21</sup>

As this quotation indicates, up until 1788, when the British arrived in the country that is now called 'Australia', there were about 250 distinct Aboriginal languages spoken in the land, depending on one's definition of 'language' and 'dialect'.<sup>22</sup>

A parallel exists with Australia's Indigenous art traditions: just as there was never one single Indigenous language in Australia, but a high level of linguistic diversity, Indigenous Australian art was and is still characterized by many different artistic genres, styles, practices and media. In relation to Indigenous Australian art, such diversity is both a pre- and post-contact phenomenon. Examples of 'hybrid' styles involving a fusion of pre- and post-contact artistic forms abound and some have been included in this exhibition.

The high-energy work of the fabulous Mara colourist Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, who works in an idiom that is rather different from other Arnhem Land artists represented in *Prism*, provides one example.<sup>23</sup> Munduwalawala's work, exemplified in this exhibition by his magical *Ngak Ngak and the Four Archers*, evinces a more perceptible 'western' influence than either Mawurndjul or Namundja, for example.<sup>24</sup>

The late Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's country was situated close to the Roper River Mission in the South East Arnhem Land region of Australia's Northern Territory. (These days, Roper River is more frequently referred to by its Indigenous name, *Ngukurr*.) The systematic, forced diaspora from Indigenous homelands in the wake of the creation of administrative centres or church missions mostly known today as 'Aboriginal settlements' is a recurrent theme in recent contact history. Indigenous people from many different language groups were brought together at these 'settlements' in the early part of last century. In Munduwalawala's case, children from eight different language groups were brought together by mission authorities at the Roper River Mission. This meant that Munduwalawala himself became a Creole (spelled 'Kriol' in the Australian context) speaker, and this 'Kriol consciousness' — not so different from Imants Tillers' 'split identity' — permeates the imagery and visual language that he deploys in his artistic *oeuvre* as a whole.

Speakers of Kriol utilize the grammar of Australian Indigenous languages, mostly with English vocabulary, although many of these English words are used in ways that are incomprehensible to Standard Australian English speakers. This detail about the Roper Kriol language has been provided because a direct analogy can be drawn with the art produced by Kriol speakers like Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, who

utilizes the substratum 'grammar' of 'country' combined with the superstratum 'visual vocabulary' of western figuration. This analogy can also be extended the perceived status of his work, which was initially received by some sectors of the art market in less than glowing terms. Particularly at the beginning of his artistic career, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's work was seen as a less acceptable form of Aboriginal artistic self-expression compared with his supposedly more 'traditional' counterparts like Mawurndjul, whose artwork is regarded as 'more authentically Aboriginal'. Just what cultural or artistic 'authenticity' might actually be in this increasingly globalized world — where many identities are hyphenated — is in itself a loaded concept. In *Prism*, the Bridgestone Museum of Art is making a major contribution to dismantling such unproductive compartmentalization by exhibiting all of these works under the rubric of 'contemporary Australian art'.

Fortunately, rigid categorizations regarding the 'cultural purity' of Aboriginal art are also in the process of breaking down in Australia, but Kriol artists have yet to gain across-the-board acceptance amongst Indigenous art collectors and the art loving public. As has been explained, despite less than admiring perceptions on the part of some purists, the works of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and artists like him are equally as land- and tradition-based as those of other Indigenous artists whose work is displayed in this exhibition, being firmly founded on the sacred geography of their homelands.

Not all of Australia's Indigenous languages have survived the processes of colonization, a fact to which Queensland Waanyi artist Judy Watson draws our attention in her *Drowning in Language* (1997). In fact, the *thématique* of Indigenous dispossession and loss of land and culture, the extensive cultural harm that has been wrought by colonization, the silencing of Indigenous voices and the secrets and lies that underpin contact history infuse all of Watson's work. Similar themes, although frequently expressed more violently, or 'in-your-face' terms, are found in Gordon Bennett's postcolonial compositions. Bennett's works raises questions about how Aboriginal people have been coerced into the ways of thinking of the colonizers, the everyday racism directed at Aboriginal people, and the horror of Aboriginal deaths in custody, sometimes at the hands of police.<sup>25</sup>

Today, less than thirty Indigenous Australian languages are still spoken by children. A direct parallel may also be drawn with Indigenous Australian art. Tragically, many of the Australian artistic traditions that existed before Cook and the white interlopers arrived have not survived the onslaughts of colonization. In its earlier days, that colonization included massacres of Indigenous people — to which artist *re*<sup>26</sup> makes harrowing reference in her remarkable installation *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes*, exhibited here, which will be analysed in more depth later in this essay — as well as forcible attempts to suppress Indigenous languages and cultural practices.

There are, therefore, numerous Indigenous Australian artistic traditions, some exceedingly old, others arising from more recent and often painful contact history. Some exist in fragmented form; others have been lost. What the older, pre-contact Australian Indigenous artistic traditions have in common is their spiritual foundation, and the fact that they are grounded in the land itself. *All* of the surviving pre-contact Indigenous Australian artistic traditions are to be understood

primarily as religious art, as existing within the realm of the spiritual or the framework of the sacred, as belonging or relating to, and intensely concerned with, the land and related cultural landscapes.

However, Indigenous Australian religion is unlike, for example, Christianity, which may be glossed as an 'abstract' religion, where the spiritual is usually distinguished from the secular or the profane. For traditionally orientated Aboriginal Australians, the sacred and the profane are not distinct, separate spheres, as they are with many of the world's religions. Most importantly, for traditionally oriented Indigenous Australian people, religious beliefs are in fact *inseparable* from the land itself, regardless of the language group to which an individual or family belongs.

The key spiritual concept that connects these different Indigenous Australian artistic movements is that which has been inadequately translated into English as 'The Dreaming'. When they paint, tradition-oriented artists re-create their Dreamings, the heroic journeyings or exploits of their Dreaming Ancestors, who, it is believed, created all natural phenomena. 'The Dreaming' refers to the time of Creation, to the Law, and to the pertaining rituals and ceremonies. Artists who paint 'Dreamings' identify with one or more Dreaming Ancestor and are regarded as 'owners' of the extended Dreaming narratives that accompany the visual iterations of their Dreamings. Typically, these Dreaming narratives function on at least three levels, referring to the immediate physical and cultural landscape, moral and ethical behaviour, and kinship relationships.

This central, land-based spiritual concept of 'The Dreaming' informs most tradition-oriented Indigenous Australian art, regardless of region. Nevertheless, there are important differences in terms of the different language and cultural groups' understanding of that central concept of Dreaming, and important differences in terms of the significant artistic and cultural practices based upon it. The Torres Strait Islanders, although Indigenous, are an exception, not being Aboriginal. This point will be taken up again in relation to Ken Thaiday's extraordinary dancing mask *Tiger Shark* (Beizam) on display in *Prism*.

In addition, Indigenous visual art practices that have survived colonization can justifiably lay claim to being the oldest continuing artistic practices in the world, while being thoroughly contemporary at the same time. Archaeologists believe that Indigenous people have lived in Australia for at least 50,000–60,000 years, although some have posited the theory that Indigenous occupation of the Australian continent may date back 100,000 years. It also needs to be noted that certain parts of Australia have been occupied for longer than others.

Of the approximately 1500 people aboard the eleven ships that arrived from Britain in 1788, about half (736) were convicts. Many were soldiers charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order among those convicts. In those days, the overwhelming majority of migrants, convicts or other, were men. Transportation of convicts to Australia continued until 1868 in Western Australia, although it was phased out earlier in the other colonies. Not all convicts were working class. As time went on, more and more 'free settlers' began migrating to Australia, often attracted by the idea of being given land — appropriated from Aboriginal people — on which to build their new lives. For a considerable time after the arrival of the First Fleet, the majority of migrants to Australia continued to be of predominantly British origin, and mostly white.

It was not until after World War II that the makeup of Australia's population really began to change in significant ways. While the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, the first major piece of legislation passed by the new federal (Commonwealth) Australian Parliament formed in 1901, remained in place throughout both world wars, it was steadily eroded during the intervening years.<sup>27</sup> From 1947, under agreement with the United Nations International Refugee Organization, over 170,000 refugees arrived over the next five years, the largest planned intake of non-British migrants in Australian history.<sup>28</sup> It was during this time that Imants Tillers' parents migrated to Australia.

The number of non-European migrants, effectively excluded since the introduction of The Immigration Restriction Act ('The White Australia Policy') at the turn of the century, surged from the mid 1960s and especially throughout the 1970s; in particular, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Malay and Indonesian migrants settled in Australia through this period.<sup>29</sup> This influx of migrants resulted in intense debate in Australia, 'a debate', as cultural theorist John Docker has written, 'over the desirability of cultural-ethnic pluralism, stimulated by post World War II largely European migration'.

One of the responses to this development, which in essence was a means of keeping Australian multiculturalism in check, but which was equally aimed at Aboriginal people and their lifeways, was the introduction of the Assimilation Policy. This policy 'targeted' Australian Aboriginal people as well as migrants, and to all intents and purposes stated as its desirable objective that migrants and Aboriginal people give up their cultural practices, customs and languages and live in exactly the same way as other Australians.

The following is an extract from the Assimilation Policy:

In the view of all Australian governments, all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.<sup>30</sup>

The Assimilation Policy provided further justification —if this was needed — for the practice of removing part-Aboriginal children from their families, which had begun in the late nineteenth century, and their placement in 'settlements' like Roper River Mission. Many members of Western Australian Yamatji artist Julie Dowling's family were affected by this policy, and this history informs a number of her paintings.

Unlike the majority of contemporary Indigenous artists, Julie Dowling is a university art school graduate. Dowling is a leading artist in the 'New Wave' of young Indigenous Australian artists. The fine portraiture of Julie Dowling, in which she depicts members of her extended family, many of whom were part of the 'Stolen Generation', provides powerful visual documentation of this era and its impact on Aboriginal individuals and families. *The Paper Dress*, arguably her greatest work so far, portrays an older mixed-heritage relative who was forcibly removed from her birth family simply as a matter of policy. This young girl was placed in a children's home, where she was taught to perform a range of domestic duties, including sewing, so that she

could become a maidservant for wealthy white people. The haunting image of the dark-skinned child, so proudly displaying her own creation, the marvellously elaborate white paper dress, is a heart-rending image, tragic and ironic. It also reveals Dowling as a fine portraitist whose visual artwork also encapsulates a serious seam of historical narrative. The flimsiness, 'whiteness' and insubstantiality of the paper dress also function metaphorically in this powerful artwork.

Like Aboriginal people and migrants, Torres Strait Islanders were expected to assimilate into 'white' Australian society, and to accept its 'core' values. As a result, Torres Strait Islanders, who are Australia's second Indigenous group, ethnically distinct from the mainlanders, also experienced significant cultural loss. This makes Darnley Island ('Erub') born Torres Strait Islander Ken Thaiday's achievement all the more extraordinary, as today's most celebrated and inventive creator of contemporary 'dance machines' and dance masks, including his magnificent *Tiger Shark* ('Beizam').<sup>31</sup>

The significance of Thaiday's work extends beyond successful cultural revival. Melissa Chiu glosses Thaiday's work as 'animatronic headdresses for the twenty-first century'.<sup>32</sup> Chiu explains that they are:

[d]esigned to sit atop the head of a dancer as ceremonial millinery, replete with moving parts operated by strings, the sculptures are disturbing amalgams of artifice and naturalism, rustic cyborgs melding keen observation of wildlife with naively robotic series of interconnected pulleys in a pantomime of blunted nature.<sup>33</sup>

There are other important dimensions to Thaiday's work, relating to the special place that the *Tiger Shark* holds in Thaiday's contemporary Islander identity, linking him to his distant, as well as recent past. Equally, the technical skill that Thaiday brings not only to the making of his remarkable sculptures, based on traditional methods that incorporate meticulous assemblage with a high level of contemporary innovation, are also significant factors. Significantly, Ken Thaiday makes a living from his art, and economic factors should not be underestimated in such post-colonial contexts.

Like Indigenous Australians, migrants of non-British cultural backgrounds were also expected to assimilate into the mainstream; it is important to note the overlap at various points in Australian history regarding the policies towards certain groups of migrants and the policies towards Aboriginal people. In the 1970s, with the election of the Federal Labor Government led by the Honourable Gough Whitlam, these policies, which over the years had steadily been eroded, were finally abandoned.

Like his predecessor Whitlam, the Liberal Prime Minister the Hon. Malcolm Fraser strongly supported multiculturalism. Fraser was instrumental in setting up ethnic radio and television (the Special Broadcasting Service, or SBS) in Australia. At around the same time, Australia also saw the arrival of large numbers of Vietnamese refugees in boats, in the aftermath the Vietnam War.

In 1989 the Australian Federal Government introduced the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, which had three aims. First, it was decided to celebrate 'cultural identity — the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their indi-

vidual cultural heritage, including their language and religion'. Second, an emphasis was placed on 'social justice — the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender, or place of birth'. Third, also to be stressed was 'economic efficiency — the need to maintain, develop and use effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background'. Australia's current, increasingly contested, multicultural policy statement reaffirms the Government's commitment to the 1999 New Agenda for Multicultural Australia, and articulates the strategic directions for multicultural policy until the end of next year.<sup>34</sup> It gives emphasis to promoting community harmony and the benefits of our cultural diversity for all Australians.

The considerable contribution to Australian society by migrant artists, both in general and especially in areas of the arts, needs to be acknowledged. Included in this group are large numbers of immigrants of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). The unforgettable imagery of Hossein Valamanesh, relating to both of his homelands, Iran (formerly Persia) and Australia, and Ah Xian's gentle, lyrical porcelain busts in which Chinese and western traditions merge, are a direct result of this influx of migrants from all parts of the world. Following the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, and especially in the early 1990s, large numbers of Chinese artists migrated to Australia. Ah Xian is one of these, but there are many other celebrated Australian artists of Chinese origin, including Guo Jian, Guan Wei, Shen Jiawei, Li Bao Hua and Wang Zhi Yuan.

In Australia, the contribution made by first-generation migrant visual artists is disproportionately high. Born in 1965, Patricia Piccinini migrated to Australia with her family in 1972. This artist also represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 2003. In her artwork Piccinini deals with global issues regarding genetic engineering, person/machine cloning — evident in *Cyclepup* — and global anxieties about the future. The questions that seem to fascinate Piccinini and that she explores through her provocative artworks include the thin line that exists between the natural and the artificial, as well as concepts relating to contemporary scientific debates, and fears that human beings have, at a global level, about the consequences of genetic engineering, stem cell research and biotechnology.

As Piccinini states:

[The] 'Nature's Little Helpers' series ... present a series of creatures that I have designed to 'assist' a series of the endangered Australian animals ... We have a long history of scientifically introducing new stuff into our environment in order to make it better, however it has rarely worked. The sculptures present a series of quite considered propositions for helper species while photographs play out the possibility of the 'success' of such an idea. People are fascinated by the tiny details, the moles and wrinkles, which almost forces them to accept the possibility of their existing ... 'Cyclepups' reverse the idea of the 'genetic engineering of nature' into a 'genetic naturalisation of engineering'. This symbiosis/colonisation/transformation story can be seen in all of the works. Whether it is the colonisation of the biological through genetic engineering, or the hosting of one species

by another, or the Bodyguards infesting the suburban sprawl which is itself overrunning the marginal habitats of endangered species, or biological processes transforming the mechanical or little blob things altering flesh, this idea recurs throughout [these] works.<sup>35</sup>

### Oh Brave New World!

Piccinini's work has significance beyond Australia, and points to the fact that contemporary Australian visual arts identities (as is the case with other first world national identities) are increasingly being defined and reframed within a global and globalizing context. Globalization refers, *inter alia*, to the linkages that exist in the global financial system as well as transnational corporate activity. Contemporary visual art is part of this system. This does not mean that place or locale are no longer important in structuring social life — clearly they are in the case of Piccinini, who has chosen to focus on endangered Australian species in her most recent series — but instead, 'the truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place'.<sup>36</sup>

Increasingly, celebrated Aboriginal artists now work in a global context, travelling the world and exhibiting their work on the international stage. For example, Arnhem Land bark painter John Mawurndjul was among those chosen for the celebrated *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition for the French Bicentenary of 1989. Mawurndjul has won many awards for his artwork, including the prestigious Clemenger art prize, and his work is also prominently displayed in the new Musée de Quai Branly Paris, where at the recent *vernissage* he was photographed beside French President Jacques Chirac. Some of Mawurndjul's images are also confronting, although in a thoroughly different way from the work of Piccinini. *Buluwana*, for example, which won the award for the best bark painting in the Telstra Art Award in 2002, is an arresting and powerful image of an Ancestral Woman of the same name, who was turned into rock during the Dreaming as the result of her encounter with a malevolent Deaf Adder.

Warpipi artist Dorothy Napangardi and Eastern Anmatyerr artist Kathleen Petyarre are also seasoned world travellers, whose work is regarded as possessing global significance. In one eminent United States gallery, Petyarre's work hangs next to a Rothko.

On the opening night of her solo exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art on 8 May 2001, Kathleen Petyarre addressed a largely non-Indigenous crowd of Indigenous art admirers who had assembled for the occasion. Before she began speaking, in a move at first confounding even those of us who know her well, Petyarre came forward and, *grande dame*-style, with a dramatic, sweeping action, bowed deeply and rather portentously to her audience. This all took place within a matter of seconds, leaving many of those present pondering its significance.

It was apparent from this gesture that Kathleen Petyarre is not only well versed in the nuances of Balinese social life and the Lutheran Church in Aboriginal settlements, but also adept in handling of 'Sydney Suits' and 'Melbourne Cocktail Frocks' who attend the opening nights of solo art exhibitions in large, glamorous metropolitan institutions.

This is a fascinating anecdote because it illustrates just of one of the myriad ways in which high-flying contemporary Indigenous Australian artists like Kathleen Petyarre have become deeply imbr-

cated in a kind of postmodern 'globalization of the Indigenous' which utilizes the international while continuing to draw from the local. While such artists may not be overly anxious about genetic engineering, these globalizing tendencies apply not only to the making, marketing and reception of the art itself, but also to the conscious creation of an aura around the persona of the contemporary artist, so essential to the postmodern art market.<sup>37</sup> Petyarre, like many other contemporary Australian artists, succeeds *par excellence* in performing this double dance.

In the next section the origins of the contemporary success of Indigenous art will be examined, as well as its implications for other Australian artists. In addition, some of the artworks represented in this exhibition will be discussed in greater depth, in terms of formal qualities and their meaning.

### **The Contemporary Australian Art Revolution, or, Papunya Tula, and Beyond**

As New Zealand-born Australian artist and scholar Ian North has written:

I believe the Aboriginal art revolution of the last three decades to be the singly most significant art movement in recorded Australian art history. It may well assume a place in world art history as a twentieth-century movement of similar significance as cubism or surrealism.

It was at Papunya in Central Australia in the early 1970s that a non-Indigenous schoolteacher, Geoffrey Bardon, encouraged a group of mostly Pintupi, Warlpiri and Eastern Anmatyerr Aboriginal men to create 'traditional' murals on the school walls. Within the ceremonial context, painting and other cultural activities had never actually ceased, but in many places, including Papunya, overt Indigenous cultural self-expression was discouraged and suppressed by settlement authorities, essentially 'driven underground' by assimilationist colonial policies.

The establishment of the Papunya Tula Artists' Cooperative soon after the men painted on the school building led to an 'explosion' of artistic production, and what in truth could be described as a revolution in the marketing and ultimately the status of Indigenous art. In the past there had been attempts to market Aboriginal art and artefacts, but with only limited success.

For example, some decades before Papunya Tula was inaugurated, Lutheran Pastor Albrecht of the Hermannsburg Mission, also located in the Northern Territory, had attempted to create a cottage industry around Arrernte artefacts, achieving moderate success. Christian missionaries at Ernabella, situated on Pitjantjantjara land in South Australia, had also encouraged Indigenous artistic activity well before the Papunya initiative. At present, Ernabella boasts the longest running Indigenous art centre in Australia — it was set up in 1948.

Such earlier initiatives were in fact the prototypes of today's successful art centres like today's Papunya Tula. There are more than fifty Indigenous art centres scattered throughout remote Australia. Jacqueline Healy has argued, forcefully and convincingly, that Indigenous cultural objectives are understood to be at least equally as po-

tent as economic objectives in such enterprises, and the two domains are for the most part inseparable.<sup>38</sup> This was certainly the case with the Indigenous artists involved in the early days of Papunya Tula, and is important in terms of understanding contemporary Indigenous artistic identities even today.

Notwithstanding earlier efforts, the 1970s Papunya movement marked the first time since colonization that Indigenous art *really* captured the imagination of the art market and the general public. Land rights for Aboriginal people were also under consideration from the early 1970s, so the visual art at Papunya did not simply emerge, like Minerva, fully armed, from a sociocultural void.<sup>39</sup> The vitally important roles of the Indigenous players at Papunya, who were pushing their own artistic and cultural agendas, also need to be taken into account. So, while Geoffrey Bardon has quite properly been recognized as playing a leading role in the grand narrative of the origins of contemporary Indigenous art, these important historical precedents, questions of Indigenous agency, and the broader sociocultural climate all need to be factored in. As the Bob Dylan song goes, 'the times they were a-changing'.

Papunya was an unlikely place for such a renaissance to occur. It was a central administrative depot for people from a range of cultural and language groups just like the Roper River Mission where Ginger Riley Munduwalawala lived, who had been (mostly) removed from their traditional country and relocated there, sometimes against their will. Papunya was an unhappy place, characterized by depression and infighting amongst its Indigenous population.

Imants Tillers has drawn a fascinating parallel between the creative artistic responses of diasporic migrant artists to Australia dealing with existential difficulty and adversity, and those of the early Papunya artists:

If you think about Papunya, where Aboriginal people were brought in from many different places — it was actually a DP [Displaced Persons] camp. And if you think of the art that came out of that, it shows how displacement creates as well as destroys, partly because DPs are often concerned about loss of identity and culture — this seems to have been the case with the Papunya Tula movement.

However one holds up the prism towards contemporary Indigenous art, and to Australian art in general, Papunya's significance needs to be acknowledged. The works of both Imants Tillers and Hossein Valamanesh provide further evidence of this. Valamanesh spent time in Papunya and attests to having been influenced by the experience itself as well as by Indigenous art. Hossein Valamanesh's *Dot Painting with Tablets* is a witty, ironic work that pays homage both to Indigenous artwork and references the aftermath of a major heart attack suffered by the artist. The prescription tablets that Valamanesh took on a daily basis comprise this work. *Dot Painting with Tablets* is both an exorcism of a painful episode in Valamanesh's life, as well as being an acknowledgment of the life-giving force of visual art.

The significance of Papunya is acknowledged in *Prism* by the inclusion of a large number of artworks by Papunya artists. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and his brother, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, as well as Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula and Ross Davis are all included. Pansy Napangarti,



the best known of the women artists of Papunya, is also represented here with her magnificent *Untitled* (1989).<sup>40</sup>

Anmatyerr artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was a relative late-comer to the original group who contributed to the contemporary Indigenous art renaissance at Papunya in the Northern Territory, but went on to become one of its most celebrated and high-profile artists. A true original, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's interpretation of his repertoire of Dreaming subject matter was always refreshing, bold and individualistic. Tjapaltjarri also constantly pushed the boundaries in terms of what he was prepared to reveal to the outside world, in visual terms, about the inner core of his cultural knowledge. Sometimes Tjapaltjarri used 'western' visual idiom, presumably partly as a solution to the restraints inherent in a visual culture of concealment that protects an inner core of secret knowledge.

Love played an important role in Tjapaltjarri's life and this is reflected in his art. The work included in this exhibition, *Man's Love Story* (1978), is a particularly fine example of Tjapaltjarri's powerful *ilpentye* or *irlpentye* ('love magic') works.<sup>41</sup> In the latter genre of work the artist portrays a Tjungurrayi man who falls in love with (or in lust with?) a Napangardi woman: an illicit relationship under the Central Australian kinship or 'skin' group system and a violation of the Law. The Tjungurrayi man in Tjapaltjarri's *Man's Love Story*, whose country is Ngarlu, closely watches the woman he desires whilst she is urinating. In Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's 'love magic' works the image of the spindle — the object that the man uses to spin the hair string that draws the woman towards him — plays a prominent role, visually. Powerless to resist this love charm, the young woman's tracks can be seen as she walks towards the man, who is seated holding his spindle.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was also innovative in terms of his use of colour and the extent to which he was prepared to share culturally sensitive imagery, including the spindle, which he depicts explicitly, well before most other Indigenous artists were prepared to do so. Such artwork indicates that Aboriginal art dealt with 'sexy and dangerous' themes and subject matter well before the present.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was also willing to forge connecting links between the two systems of visual representation available to him. In *Man's Love Story* Tjapaltjarri utilizes his own group's iconographic system based on metonymy, while also depicting the earth and vegetation by small clusters of dotting using variegated colours.<sup>42</sup> Such colour usage represents a significant departure from that of some of the other early Papunya artists, who tended to use colour to simulate natural earth pigments.

An example of a somewhat more conservative colour scheme is to be found in Turkey Tolson Tjupurrurla's sensational *Straightening Spears at Illyingaungau*, which on the surface appears to be an abstract work, but in fact makes reference to the age-old Indigenous practice of bending, straightening and reshaping spears over a hot fire. Turkey Tolson Tjupurrurla is another of the most distinctive and influential of the original Papunya Old Masters, and the work represented in *Prism* is believed by many to be his greatest.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri is also represented in *Prism* by another splendid work, his lyrical *Water Dreaming* (1983). The elements of fire and water are of immense importance in the Australian context and it is not simply a matter of chance that there are so many Indigenous Dreamings making reference to that most precious of natural

resources, water. Tjapaltjarri's *Water Dreaming* alludes to above ground water.

Other works represented in this exhibition, including those of Tjapaltjarri's younger countrywoman, Kathleen Petyarre, indicate the location of subterranean water, an equally valuable resource. Australia is the driest continent on earth, and such works are replete with detailed information about Indigenous desert people's traditional modes of successfully managing the multiplicity of challenges presented by their harsh living conditions: climatic extremes, acute water shortages and resource-poor landscapes.

In addition, Indigenous knowledge of practical ethology, the geographical distribution of various species of edible flora and fauna, methods of long-term ecological and environmental sustainability, and the solutions that people found in order to survive in such an inhospitable and arid place are also encoded in paintings such as Clifford Possum's *Water Dreaming*. The extended oral Dreaming narratives that accompany all such works entail a fascinating synthesis of traditional Indigenous scientific knowledge and guiding principles for human morality.

After Papunya, other Indigenous Australian communities followed suit in what has been described as a 'domino effect'.<sup>43</sup> At Utopia, in the late 1970s under the tutelage of Jenny Green, artists including Emily Kngwarrey and her niece Kathleen Petyarre and other countrywomen began making batik and screenprinting cloth for sale.

Anmatyerr woman Emily Kam Kngwarrey (previously Kame Kngwarreye, using an earlier linguistic orthography), who traversed many themes and styles during her relatively brief flowering as an artist, at times focussing on one or more particular Dreaming within the same painting, went on to become, in the opinion of many, Australia's greatest living artist.<sup>44</sup> A vivid colourist, and an artist whose bold experimentation with styles and remarkable level of output continued almost until the day she died, Kngwarrey's importance as an artist is reflected in the number and quality of works by which she is represented in this exhibition. Emily Kngwarrey's undated series of exquisite, small works, *Untitled*, and her portrayal of the tangled, interlocking underground root system of a species of the native yam, *Ipomoea Costata*, a vegetable food, in her *Anaty (Wild Potato)* of 1989, make reference to one of her major Dreamings, the Yam. The joyous explosion of colour and the sense of energetic movement in her *Kame Summer Awelye* (1992) evokes the flowering of the yams as they go through their life cycle, as well as the all-women ceremonies that include dancing, singing and body painting (*awelye*) that honour this immensely important vegetable food and signify women's landownership. Finally, Emily Kngwarreye's minimalist but immensely evocative *Untitled No. 1—5* (better known as her *Stripes*), created in the 1990s, relates to women's body painting on their upper torsoes, arms and thighs during *awelye* ceremonies.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps more than any contemporary Indigenous artist before her, Emily Kngwarrey pushed the boundaries of public perceptions of Indigenous art, wresting it from the ethnographic paradigm and liberating it to be opened up to a range of new possibilities and interpretations. Sometimes Kngwarrey worked with huge, hasty strokes using her sable brush; on other works, a more subtle process was deployed.

With regard to his *Nature Speaks* series, two of which are represented in *Prism*, Imants Tillers specifically acknowledges the defining

influence of Emily Kngwarrey, whose work is directly referenced in *Nature Speaks — H*. For Tillers, contemporary Indigenous art and his Latvian identity combine synergistically as sources of creative energy:

These works are part of my *Nature Speaks* series, which are all in some way or another evocations of, or allusions to, landscape, rather than 'literal' landscapes. For example, there's a Latvian poem about rocks and grass and other parts of the natural environment 'speaking' — it's called *Dabarunya*. There are things in common there with ideas and beliefs that inform Aboriginal art.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, these works frequently contain bold text that makes reference to an excerpt from an English translation of the Stéphane Mallarmé poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*: [a throw of the dice will never abolish chance]. This is a continuing motif in this series of work, and indeed, who could have ever envisaged this fortuitous juxtaposition of Latvian artistic influences melded with visual reference to the work of an octogenarian Eastern Anmatyerr artist in one of Australia's most remote communities?

Emily Kam Kngwarrey's niece, celebrated Eastern Anmatyerr artist Kathleen Petyarre, and Kathleen Petyarre's grand-daughter, Abie Loy Kemarre, of mixed Eastern Anmatyerr and Alywarr parentage, are also represented in *Prism*, as is their countrywoman, the Alywarr artist Margaret Turner Apetyarr, another relatively late bloomer as an artist.

Kathleen Petyarre is best known for her works that record the seasonal journeying of her Dreaming Ancestor, Arnkerth, the small Mountain or Thorny Devil Lizard (*Moloch Horridus*), who travels through her remote desert 'country' Atnangker, situated in the northeastern Northern Territory. Three outstanding examples of this Dreaming have been included in this exhibition: *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (With Winter Sandstorm)*, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (After Hailstorm)* and *Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (Watercourses & Rockholes)*.

Seasonal variations in the colour of the usually bright ochre-red earth of Atnangker country are depicted by means of constellations of the finest dotting, denoting the subtlety of the semi-circular movement of Kathleen Petyarre's Dreaming Ancestor, the Mountain Devil, a small reptile resembling a bonsai dinosaur.<sup>47</sup>

In summer it can reach fifty-four degrees centigrade in the shade at Atnangker, where Kathleen Petyarre spent her childhood. Petyarre did not meet or even see any white people until she was about eight years old. There is very little permanent water in this arid country, and it is therefore a sacred commodity, a fact that is a central visual reference in *Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (Watercourses & Rockholes)*.

When asked, for the purposes of this catalogue, to elaborate upon her identity as a contemporary Australian artist, Kathleen Petyarre looked at me as if I had lost possession of my faculties and replied, simply: 'I am Arnkerth'.<sup>48</sup> This response is fascinating in that, despite being a celebrated artist, seasoned world traveller and art world identity, Petyarre continues to frame the most fundamental part of her identity within those earliest formative desert experiences. Petyarre's identification with her Dreaming Ancestor is absolute. Kathleen Petyarre and Arnkerth, this small chameleon lizard, are one, indivisible.<sup>49</sup> To this day, Arnkerth is Kathleen Petyarre's primary identity marker: with

this artist, there is no hint of 'split' or 'splintered' identity. Petyarre is secure in her Eastern Anmatyerr identity, which has been determined by the Law of the Dreaming (called *Altyerr*, in her language).

Abie Loy Kemarre, Kathleen Petyarre's grand-daughter, is part of this impressive multi-generational Eastern Anmatyerr artistic dynasty mostly comprising women. Kemarre is regarded as one of the most talented and exciting young Indigenous artists — or for that matter, contemporary Australian artists — to emerge in the last decade. Abie Loy Kemarre was only a young child when, encouraged by her grandmother who was working with batik at the time, she formed the ambition to become an artist:

When I was a little girl I would watch my grandmother Kathleen Petyarre and all the other mob doing the silk, making the silk. I began learning doing silk with Kathleen. Kathleen was also a schoolteacher at our school, Utopia School ... When I was a very young child my grandmother told me she wanted me to be [an] artist — I love painting and so I thought it over and decided to be an artist then. When my grandmother Kathleen turned to painting [in the 1980s], I watched that closely too, and ever since, I've always been an artist.

Kemarre's mother (Kathleen Petyarre's daughter), is of Eastern Anmatyerr ethnicity, while Kemarre's father is Alywarr. Alywarr country adjoins Eastern Anmatyerr country, but is situated further north-east.

Represented in *Prism* by two of her body paint (*Awelye*) works, and her Bush Leaf Dreaming, complex compositions depicting interlocking bush leaves, Kemarre's works, like many other works from Central Australia and the Western Desert, have no top, no bottom, and no horizontal line, and hence, no 'right way up'. For non-Indigenous spectators, these works probably evince little or no sense of the whole that precedes their subordinate parts. Abie Loy Kemarre's works possess an astounding, three-dimensional quality, conveying the kinetic energy of the dance, or in the case of her Bush Leaf Dreaming, the wild profusion of the intertwining medicinal leaves that grow in profusion on her country.

The 'whole' to which I have referred, that 'whole' that cleaves together these works, is the foundational concept of the Dreaming and its attendant oral narratives. Because of the importance of the relationship between these artworks and their narratives, a very brief rendition of Abie Loy Kemarre's Bush Leaf narrative follows:

The bush leaf grows in a swamp near some sandhills close to the Utopia region, Abie's paternal grandfather's country, and it is known for its wonderful curative properties. These bush leaves, pounded, mixed with water and drunk as a liquid, or rubbed into the body, are able to cure a range of illnesses, including colds, headaches, stomachaches, menstrual problems and sores. The Bush Leaf, as a Dreaming, is closely associated with women, and is a shape-shifter, a state-changer who possesses the ability to transform herself from her bush leaf-form into a woman, then to morph back into a leaf. The aspect of the Bush Leaf Dreaming that Kemarre

paints belongs to women only. The accompanying Dreaming narrative contains a good deal of information about the precise locations of this leaf in arid parts of the country.<sup>50</sup>

The bush leaf, in both her human and leaf incarnations, is painfully shy — when people touch her to pick her leaves, she wilts with embarrassment because of the shame of being touched by others. This narrative not only discloses some of the properties of this fascinating plant, but acts as a metaphor for the artist herself: a young woman who in some circumstances is excruciatingly shy and vulnerable, but whose artistic talent is potentially a source of great fecundity and genuine visceral power. Kemarre's boldly experimental work places it at the vanguard of contemporary Australian visual art.

Alywarr artist Margaret Turner Apetyarr, also represented here by a vibrant *Awelye* (Body Paint) work and an authoritative and exquisitely rendered and visually powerful iteration of the *Bush Orange Dreaming*, was, like Kathleen Petyarre, part of the original batik-making group at Utopia in the 1970s. As is the case with Petyarre, Margaret Apetyarr's finely delineated depictions of the dancing associated with body painting and of her Dreaming, the Bush Orange, owe a great deal to her early conquest of the intricacies and challenges of batik method. Like Petyarre, in terms of her personal identity politics, the fact that Margaret Turner Apetyarr's close identification with her Bush Orange Dreaming Ancestor is of the utmost significance.<sup>51</sup>

The Kimberley Region of Western Australia is located considerably further west of Alywarr and Anmatyerr country. It was not until 1987, when the Warlayirti Artists' Cooperative was established, that the Balgo or Balgo Hills (the Kukatja name for which is 'Wirrimanu') artists' work really began commanding widespread national, and ultimately international, attention.<sup>52</sup> Balgo artists are noted for their bold colour usage, and Eubena Nampitjin's oeuvre is no exception. In addition, the daring asymmetry of Nampitjin's work, and the freedom with which she structures, arranges, combines or juxtaposes elements of her artwork to form a whole, has justifiably earned her the reputation as one of Australia's foremost contemporary artists.

While Eubena Nampitjin's paintings can certainly be appreciated and admired for their purely formal properties, their 'colour power' and marvellous, curvilinear, sometimes ridged, rounded, looped or wavy line-work, without reference to the underlying subject matter and without invoking the elaborate Dreaming narratives in which these visual properties are deeply embedded, it is important to acknowledge that they are in fact 'Dreamings'.<sup>53</sup> In terms of contemporary Aboriginal art, the postmodern idea of the 'death of the subject' is simply irrelevant.

This is a key difference that is apparent when we compare the work of some non-Indigenous Australian artists with works by desert dwelling artists like Eubena Nampitjin, or Freddy Timms (a countryman of the late Rover Thomas, who hails from even further west), or Warlpiri artist Dorothy Napangardi (whose country is a little further east than that of Nampitjin).

Dorothy Napangardi's magnificent *Salt on Mina Mina*, which is part of her Women's Dreaming, and her related *Karlangu* (*Digging Sticks*) provide striking evidence of such difference, especially in the area of spatial apprehension. Childhood, for Napangardi and Nampitjin, was spent entirely outdoors, in the bush, deeply affecting their spatial

cognition and thus their artistic production, as well as influencing colour choices and infilling practices. It is significant that their works fill the entire canvas.

Rosemary Laing, a non-Indigenous artist and one of Australia's leading contemporary photographers, has opened herself to the influence of Indigenous art and culture. While the influence of Indigenous art and ways of 'seeing country' on Laing's recent photographic series, 'burning Ayer' is discernible, it avoids any suggestion of appropriation.<sup>54</sup>

Rosemary Laing explains that:

At Balgo, it was significant to me to be given permission to work on Indigenous land, and in that place. The ethics and process of gaining permission from the Wirrimanu (Balgo) Community in order to work there was important. I am from the eastern seaboard, so in coming to that desert region, I was working from that positioning. This set up a conversation between these two places, the histories we share, and have inherited; and where we are at this moment in time — culturally and politically — in terms of addressing that history, as we acknowledge and attempt to come to terms with that history. This conversation point is the subject of this series 'one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape'.

... The burning Ayer works could be described as a 'restorative enactment' visualizing a better conversation for this time. In this work the mounds of mass-produced furniture resemble the form of the familiar and iconic Uluru (formerly known as "Ayers Rock") where I burn away the European name of this landmark and its associations — a powerful visual statement in line with the linguistic restoration in 1993 of 'Uluru', the rock's local Indigenous Tjukurpa name. In English 'Ayer' sounds like 'air' when spoken. Burning changes the molecular structure of air — this is metaphorical in terms of essentially redressing historical pasts from the vantage point of the present day.

At Balgo, I purchased for myself, for the first time, art works made by other artists. The relationship of the painted marks and the colour work belonging to this place we now share is significant.<sup>55</sup>

Laing's seriousness of intent is indicated by the fact that the cheap, ugly furniture that was stacked up in the shape of 'Ayer's Rock', and by implication, the colonial, linguistic imposition of 'Ayer' (the name of a prominent colonist) was not only *metaphorically* burned, but *actually* set ablaze: this was no digital simulation. The purpose of the conflagration was purgative, in keeping with Indigenous fire ceremonies that were and still are used to resolve long-standing grudges between groups of people. Fire is not only cleansing and purifying, but also, in the context of the Australian bush, it is *necessary* to promote regrowth and therefore, new life.<sup>56</sup>

A number of the works in this exhibition show that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists are, from their own subject positioning, grappling with the past, in the hope of a better future. If

Laing's works entail one type of 'restorative enactment', the works of Indigenous photographer Darren Siwes, represented here by his *Church 1*, and *1901*, involve another kind. Siwes' works also involve performance of a sort, deconstructing hallowed Australian institutions representing Church and State. Laing and Siwes may work from the flip sides of the colonial coin, but their aims are not dissimilar.

Siwes' photographic palimpsests commemorating enduring Indigenous presence direct attention to the unresolved issues that exist between past, present and future Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is significant that a good deal of Siwes' work is set around 1901.

In addition, Siwes makes it clear that in his work he is attempting to throw off the fetters of externally defined identity and replace false 'perceptions' with a more nuanced approach to understanding contemporary Indigenous Australian identities:

My work is less about my own identity than the ways in which perceptions of others tend to stereotype Indigenous identities, to make us into something that fits their own stereotypes.

The late, great Michael Riley also has two works included in *Prism*, ethereal images of a Christian Bible and of a boomerang, both *Untitled*. Placed side by side, the juxtaposed pan-Aboriginal image of the boomerang with that of the pan-Christian symbol of the Bible, referencing the imposition of Christianity on Indigenous people, are in implied dialogue. Set against the bluest of Australian skies, these works reinforce Michael Riley's reputation as a visual poet of high degree.

Brook Andrew figures prominently in this new wave of young Australian visual artists challenging colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial assumptions, and also, in his case, sexual orthodoxies and artistic dogma. Of Wiradjuri heritage, Andrew's profile has grown exponentially in recent years and he is now considered one of Australia's leading artists, working across a range of different media, including photography, screen printing, digital art and multimedia.

Andrew is a conceptual artist, who at the relatively tender age of twenty-six created his provocatively titled *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996) in which he critiques stereotypic notions of male Indigeneity.<sup>57</sup> *Sexy and Dangerous* comprises an archival photographic portrait of a beautiful young Aboriginal man in the prime of life. Andrew has digitally altered the image by incorporating the words 'sexy and dangerous' directly onto the young man's body, with Roman script and also, more cryptically perhaps, with Chinese characters. This serves to liberate the image from purely localized, colonial Australian associations.

Those strategically chosen words, 'Sexy and Dangerous', emblazoned on the young man's upper chest, are tantamount to a political *intervention* on Andrew's part. Subverting dominant readings of the original image and, metaphorically speaking, turning historical interpretations upside down, Andrew's inclusion of the words 'sexy' and 'dangerous' oblige viewers to reconsider the original image. The tactical use of the word 'sexy' acts to reclaim the intrinsic beauty, grace and dignity of the young man in question, whilst the word 'dangerous' has been calculated to contest earlier received anthropological readings of such imagery.

In a similar vein, Leah King Smith, in her graceful, rhythmic pho-

tographs (*Untitled*) from the series *Patterns of Connection*, makes use of colonial photography in which Aboriginal Victorians were the subjects (objects?) of the photographic gaze, and reconstitutes them in ways that challenge earlier, received versions of colonial history. While perhaps less 'in-your-face' than Brook Andrew's work, King Smith's images of Indigenous people, including prominent Indigenous artist William Barak, are beautiful and unforgettable as yet another act of postcolonial restitution.

Similar comments apply to the inimitable Fiona Foley's photographic works, also on display in *Prism*. Instead of using archival material à la Leah King Smith or Brook Andrew, she courageously casts *herself* as a present-day doppelgänger of an 'archival image' — that of a happy-go-lucky, presumably permanently sexually available, 'native island girl'. Posing in a manner that will resonate deeply with those familiar with this genre of sexist, racist, colonial photography, Fiona Foley, herself a contemporary Badtjala woman, is using humour as a powerful weapon to interrogate some of the most destructive sexual practices of the recent past, where white men frequently assumed that beautiful young Aboriginal girls were simply there for the taking.

High profile, New York-based Australian artist Tracey Moffatt also uses 'black humour' to take up the fight against sexism in *Love*, in which she has compressed hundreds of hours of Hollywood movies into a short, thrillingly action-packed DVD.<sup>58</sup> In a Quentin Tarantino-meets-Germaine Greer type move, the first part of Moffatt's DVD shows women being abused at the hands of men. Later, we are privy to the women's revenge. Serious questions about how violence begets further violence and about what would constitute an appropriate response to the men's inexcusable behaviour are also raised. Tracey Moffatt's dreamlike photographic works *Up In the Sky* also make a significant contribution to *Prism*.

Photographer and new media artist r e a's installation, *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes*, makes reference to a plethora of issues that continue to affect relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. The two 'targeted' figures, the first of One Pound Jimmy,<sup>59</sup> so-named because his Rousseau-esque<sup>60</sup> likeness adorned the one pound note in the days when Australia's currency was modelled on that of Britain, and the other, of r e a herself, are positioned to indicate the unbroken line of racist practice and discourse directed at Aboriginal people, past and present. Today, contends r e a, such targeting of Indigenous people is still real enough, although it exists mostly at the level of symbolic rather than physical violence — expressing itself as racism, taunts, and social and economic inequality. The accompanying sound track is also a significant part of *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes*.

r e a explains this work in the following terms:

In *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes*, I'm exploring racial discourse in the uniquely Australian context and I guess, reflecting that back to an audience via these negative photographic images that have played such a large part in constructing false perceptions of Indigenous identities. Questions that I am asking though this work include: Who has the right to construct me? How can I deconstruct these powerful images and forge, create and display equally powerful imagery that will help reframe our shared history?

Another part of the discourse underpinning this work would be about how the history of colonisation has forced white Australians into feeling so much shame that they would prefer this part of their history to be silenced and be made invisible. What I am doing is reflecting this history back to the predominantly non-Aboriginal audience of my artwork, while at the same time reinforcing it with evidence of a living, breathing Indigenous culture that is thriving regardless of the attempted genocide that specifically targeted the many Indigenous peoples who belong to this land. The reason that I include photographs that also 'target' myself in this work is to show that, despite everything, we Indigenous Australians have survived, but how nevertheless, that ugly, racist, colonial past continues to live on today, in the form of racism and negative perceptions about Indigenous people, rather than being reinforced at gunpoint, as it was in One Pound Jimmy's time.<sup>61</sup>

In terms of the contemporary Australian identities explored through the artworks in *Prism*, r e a's work poses many questions that have long-term implications for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The signs are encouraging: more and more Australians, especially young Australians of all backgrounds, are contesting earlier versions of Australian history and identity construction, making sustained attempts to exorcise the ghosts of the past, and to work collectively towards a future where all Australians can 'share the space'. In this regard, many of the artists represented in *Prism* —both Indigenous and non-Indigenous — are leading the way.

### Conclusion

*Prism* invites Japanese viewers to encounter a range of distinctive Australian artistic identities (*identities* — plural, not singular) all of which are valid, regardless of the artist's background, preferred medium or style. By unapologetically placing Indigenous art at the centre of this exhibition, thereby reflecting its centrality in contemporary Australian visual art, without marginalizing Australian artwork by artists of migrant origins, Japanese viewers are invited to glimpse into another world. For many, this will be a little-known world, a world that, inevitably, to be mediated through the prism of contemporary Japanese identity.

But please — hold that unique prism up to the light. Ask questions about what makes this exhibition distinctively 'Australian'.

In a metaphorical sense, viewers are also 'prisms' through which understanding of these contemporary Australian artworks will be transmitted. The differing backgrounds of 'lookers' constitute systematic complexes of 'interference patterns' in terms of what we are actually *capable* of seeing. For many years, as has been explained, the majority of non-Indigenous Australians were unable to appreciate the value of Indigenous art. Processes leading to change take time and a willingness to engage with the foreign and the unfamiliar.

So therefore, it is inevitable that viewers of these marvellous artworks, Japanese and otherwise, will 'bend' what they see through

the 'prism' of their own cultural particularities. Rather than losing anything in translation, new visions will be discovered. For many Japanese, this will entail appreciating an unexpected and different kind of beauty.

\*The English text is the author's final version and differs from her original text on which the Japanese translation (pp.101-117) is based. Late changes to the English text could not be included in the Japanese translation due to print deadlines.

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