

Imants Tillers: one world many visions

14 July – 16 October 2006

Introduction: one and many

Imants Tillers is one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary artists, who established a national and international reputation in the early 1980s. This survey exhibition will provide the opportunity to trace the high points of Tillers' artistic development over more than two decades. The exhibition includes paintings shown in the Venice Biennale in 1986 when Tillers was selected to represent Australia along with other key works from the 1980s, through to the remarkable *Diaspora* series of the 1990s, to evocative works such as the *Nature speaks* series 1998–2006 and a major new work *Terra incognita* 2005.

The works have been carefully selected to convey Tillers' personal approach in his particular artistic processes and his ongoing interest in issues of identity and displacement. The presence and absence of self is at the heart of Tillers' work. It is bound up with concerns about origins and originality that are implicit in his quotation of images from reproductions of artworks and other sources and the re-working of them. While issues of authorship may be challenging, an Imants Tillers work is easily recognisable. The personal aspects of his approach reside in his distinctive canvasboard system and in the specificity of his choices – be they visual, intellectual or intuitive. The personal aspects appear in correspondences he discovers between the sources and his own experience; in unexpected juxtapositions to form new realities; in the sensuous, layered surfaces and subtleties of tone and luminous colour; in the transformations and presence of the art.

Tillers has written that the life of an artist is essentially a solitary one. Yet the world he inhabits in the work itself is connected with a rich repository of ideas and imagery. The idea of one and many, of the unit and the multiple, of an interconnecting web-like whole, relates to the remarkable system that Tillers



has developed for his art. Since 1981 this has involved working on small amateur painters' canvasboards that come together in grid-like structures to form a work. A single work can contain anywhere from three to 300 panels. This method has provided a way for Tillers to work in relatively small studios and still create large paintings, even though he has often not been able to view an entire work until it is exhibited in a larger gallery space. After coming up with the initial idea and creating a working 'map' as a guide, the making of a painting is quite intimate; the artist sitting at his studio desk to work on individual panels which subsequently get placed on the floor as one layer after another is left to dry. The process of work evolving from table to floor is performative, mirroring the subsequent installation of the work on the wall as one panel is applied after the next. After being shown on the wall (held on by Velcro tabs), the canvasboards come apart again, stacked in beacon-like formations that have a sculptural presence. In some instances the stacks have become works in their own right, like his recent installation *Art is an action* 2006 in the exhibition.

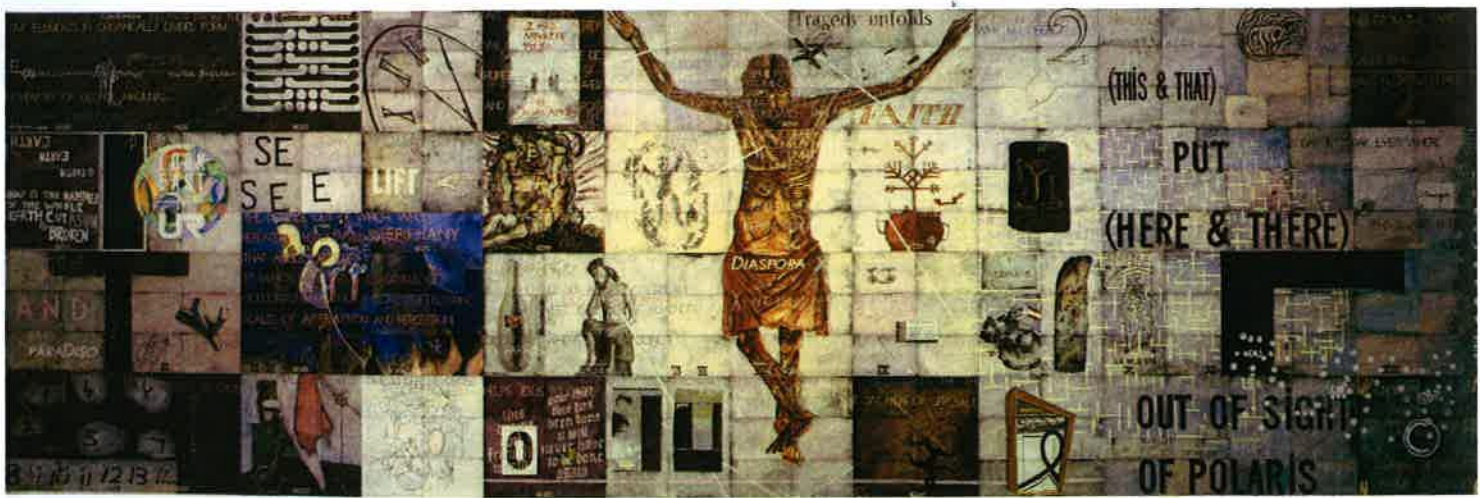
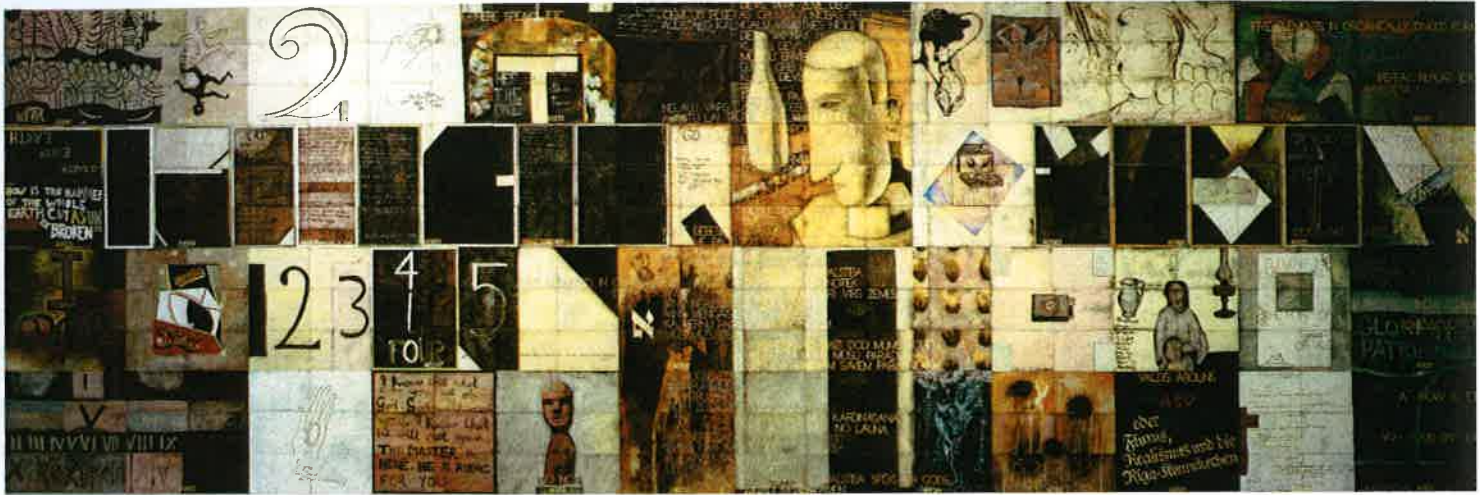
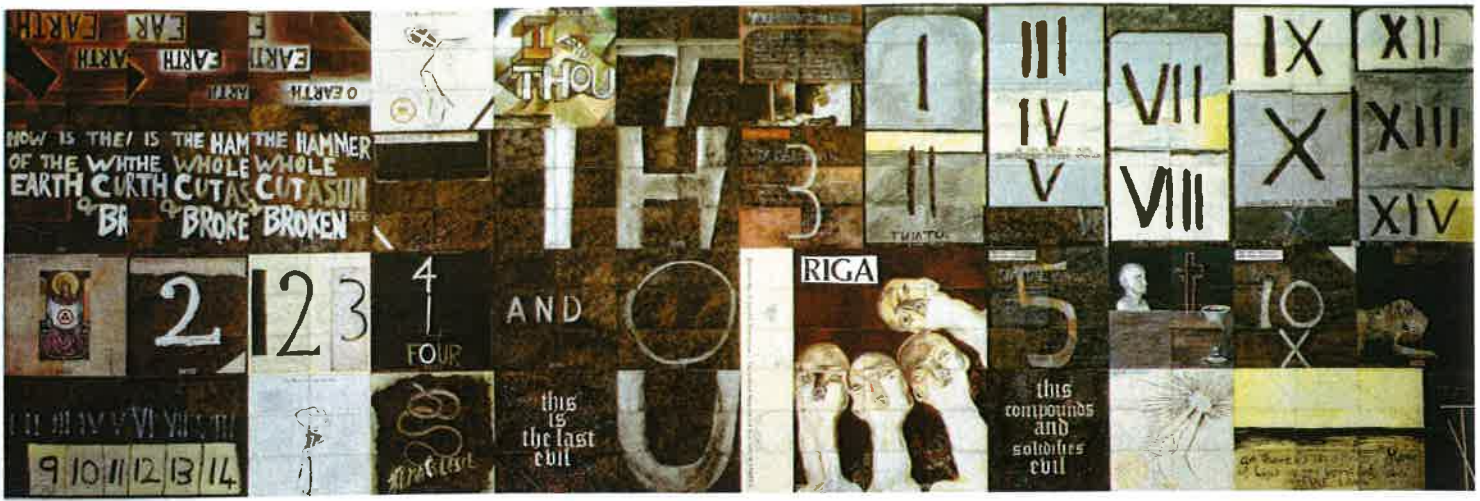
Imants Tillers and Jennifer Slatyer installing *Terra incognita* 2005
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2005
Photograph: Patrice Riboust

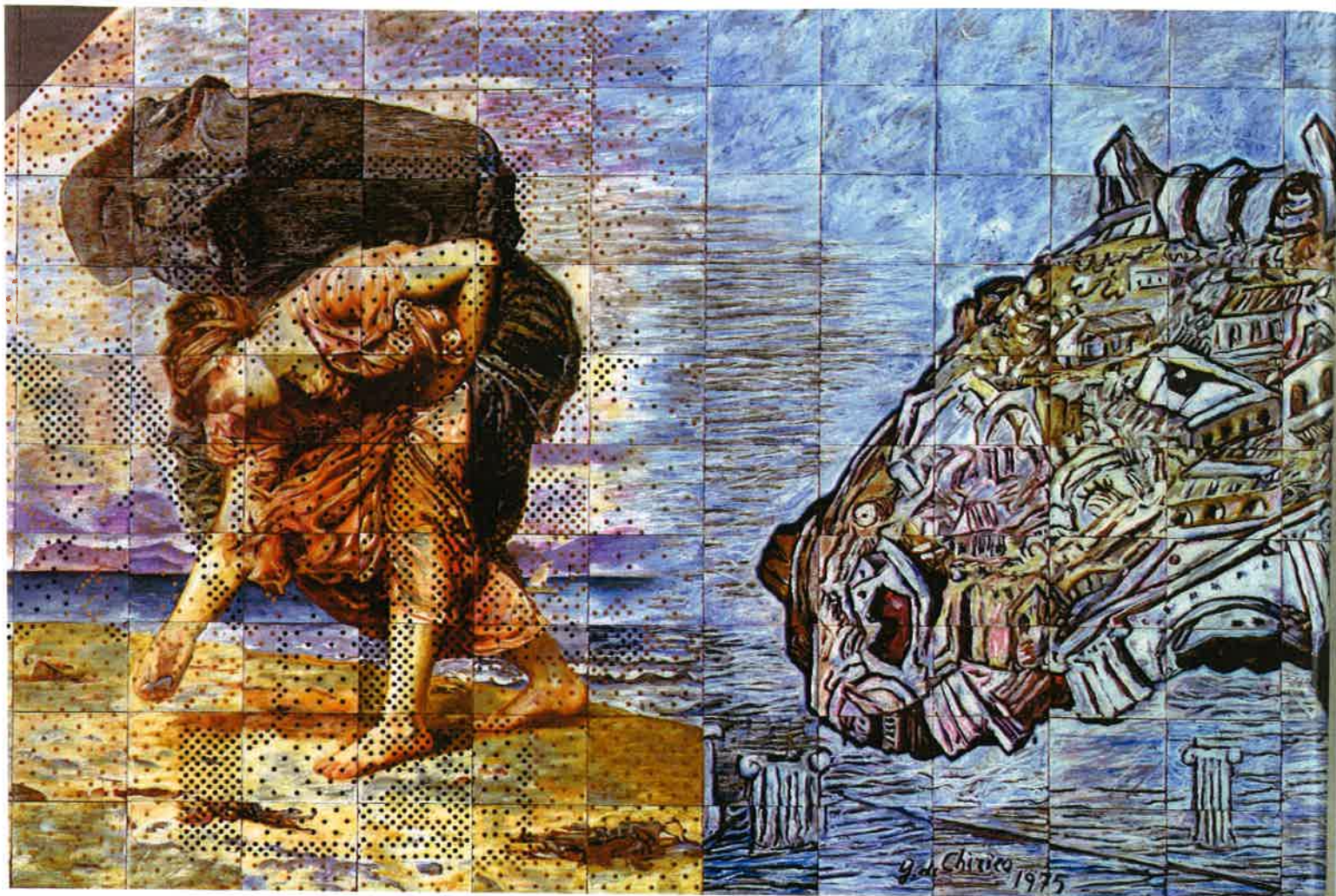
Diaspora 1992
oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvasboards
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Izkliede 1994
oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 299 canvasboards
Gene and Brian Sherman Collection, New York
Courtesy of Sherman Galleries

Paradiso 1994
oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 299 canvasboards
The Chartwell Collection, Hamilton, New Zealand

Farewell to reason 1996
oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 292 canvasboards
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra





The hyperborean and the speluncar 1986 oilstick, enamel and synthetic polymer on 130 canvasboards, Perth Tullers collection, Perth

Conversations across time

Tillers' painting *The hyperborean and the speluncar* 1986, with its visual and poetic resonances of the sea, the wind and the cave, was the perfect work to show at the Venice Biennale. Hyperborean refers to Greek mythology and the people who lived in a land beyond Boreas, the north wind; speluncar refers to one who explores caves. The dominant sources are de Chirico's *The mysterious animal* 1975 and a painting by the 19th-century British artist, Frederick Leighton, *Greek girls picking up pebbles by the sea* 1871. In his work Tillers establishes a meeting place for artists of different time-frames and stylistic approaches who adopted a similar approach to his own. In both instances these artists borrowed from classical Greek sources and adapted them to their own ends.

Tillers has in turn edited the Leighton image for his own ends, extracting a single figure from the group of women, while still locating her on a beach. In keeping with the sensuality of the original, the woman is like a figure on a classical Greek vase: poised in her tender gesture of collecting, invested with a sense of drama in the folds

of the drapery that wrap around her body and billow above her head. In the more direct quotation of the de Chirico image, classical references to houses, temples and acropolises are treated in the manner of the 16th-century artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo inhabiting the horse's head that has become the mysterious, symbolic bearer of the past.

In the spectrum of Tillers' work de Chirico has been a continuing source of fascination. Since the 1970s he has been drawn to de Chirico's interest in the metaphysical and apparently coincidental occurrences across time and place. A quite personal connection with this artist is found in Tillers' work *Inherited absolute* 1992, based on de Chirico's *The painter's family* 1926. The work incorporates a reference to a drawing by his first-born daughter Isidore as a child. In the re-making of the work Tillers retraced the formation of the letters of a child learning to write – learning, tentatively, how each letter is shaped – observing his offspring's early interest in numbers and repetition. Isidore Tillers recalls that as a child she often spent time with her father in his studio, like her younger



sister Saskia later on, she often had a go at making her own canvasboard works. In Tillers' adaptation of de Chirico's intimate family group, the added lines across the surface suggest the passing of time. There is also a shared connection with the processes of making art (in references to the painter's materials) and with architecture – in the figures that do not inhabit the buildings but are inhabited by them. In Tillers' correspondence with de Chirico there is always a shared fascination with serendipity and with the idea of the past being alive in the present.

The Diaspora works

Although born in Australia, Tillers' experience growing up as a child of Latvian refugees who migrated from a Displaced Persons camp in Germany in 1949, left him with a sense of fragmentation and an awareness of psychic exile. The feeling of his own 'in-betweenness' – belonging partly to two cultures and not fully to either – has informed his art and life. When he was growing up in Sydney Tillers attended Latvian school on weekends

in addition to his normal schooling during the week. As much as he may have felt some ambivalence as he moved from his parental home into the wider world, at times wanting to free himself from the shadows of a past he could only imagine, as a child of refugees he had a sense of responsibility to his parents' memories.

Tillers described his *Diaspora* series of the 1990s as introducing 'a new paradigm' in his work. The four major paintings in the series collectively represent an epic statement relating to diasporas – to the dislocation of peoples from their original homelands (including within their own lands due to colonisation) and the coming together of disparate cultures that is so much part of the stories and legacies of communities in the 20th and 21st centuries. Seen collectively the *Diaspora* works are, to quote Pierre Restany, like a vast 'epigraphic fresco' enfolding many visions.¹ Taking into account the broad sweep of the series from the first painting *Diaspora* 1992, through *Izkliede* 1994 (Latvian for diaspora), to *Paradiso* 1994 (an anagram for diaspora), to *Farewell to reason*

Inherited absolute 1992; oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 115 canvasboards Orange Regional Gallery Gift of the Friends of the Orange Regional Gallery



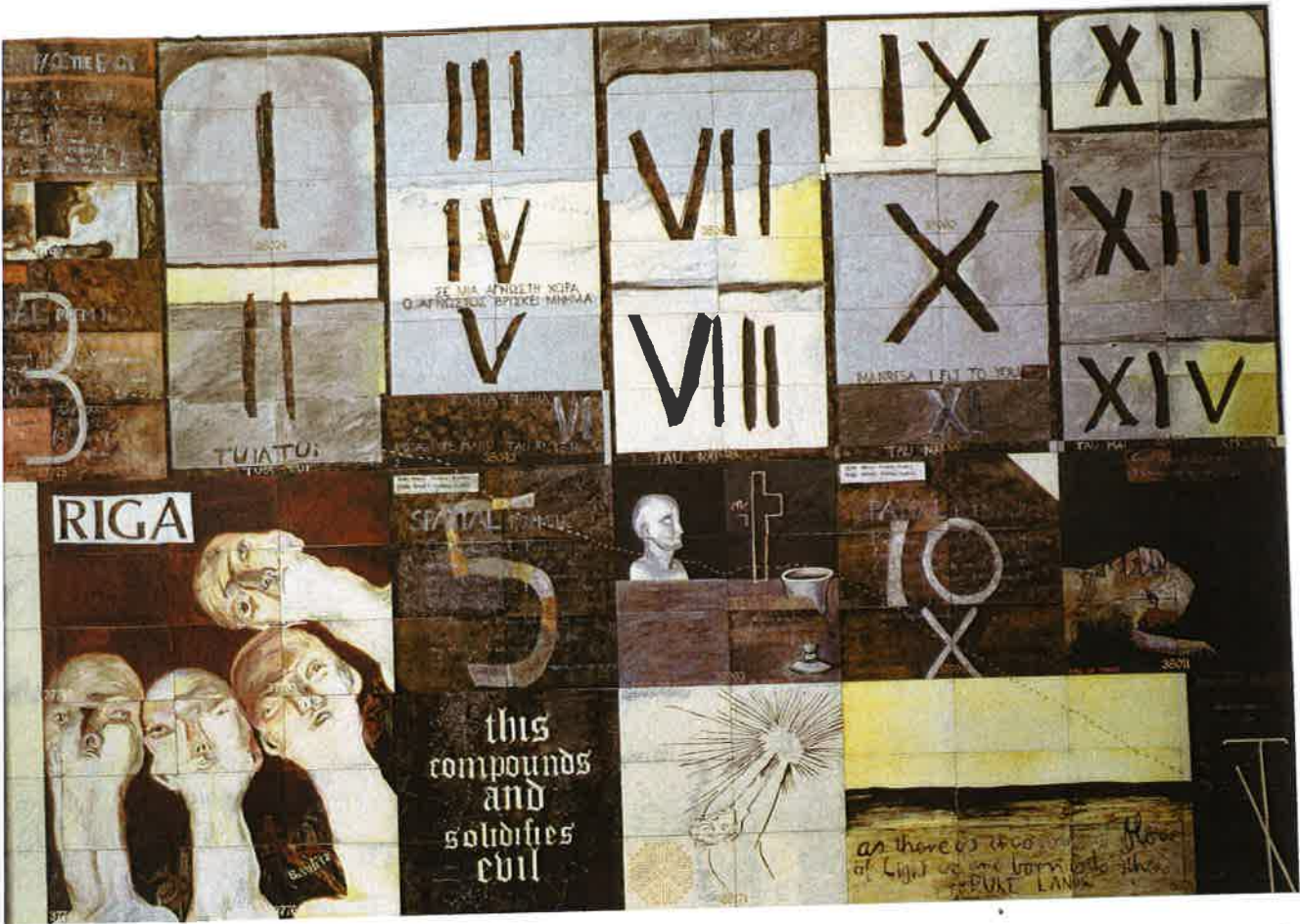
1996, the most striking change in Tillers' art appears in the way that he includes many small paintings nesting within each large work. Another distinctive element of these paintings is that they include more text references than previous works, locating language as a potent source of identity: suppressed, fractured, regained and reworked as poetry, political activism, performance art, ritual and lament.

Tillers' monumental painting *Diaspora* 1992 came about in part as a response to dramatic political events. After growing up with the view that the fate of Latvians was to be perpetually subsumed by a colonising culture or to go into exile in Siberia, the newfound freedom of the Baltic States that occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 seemed to Tillers to be remarkable, a sudden turnaround. The first small painting that he included in *Diaspora* was a reference to *The Madonna Oriflamma* 1926 by Nicholas Roerich, a Russian artist inspired by Tibetan mysticism, theosophy and Russian icons. He was also the originator of the Roerich Peace Pact, signed by President Roosevelt and other world leaders in 1935, that sought the preservation of cultural institutions around the world in times of war. The flag held by the Madonna in the painting is The Banner of Peace, the symbol of the Pact. In contrast, the trauma of shared memory is alluded to in the section containing four pale heads on long flexible necks probing space like radars,

inspired by Georg Baselitz's *Oberon* 1963–64 and re-inscribed with the word RIGA; the red and white reflecting the colours of the Latvian flag. This segment refers in part to the suppression of the Latvian language under Soviet annexation and the loss of a public voice.

The title of the fourth work in the *Diaspora* series *Farewell to reason* (p.7) 1996 comes from a book by Paul Feyerabend. The anchoring power of the work is the dignified presence of the Aboriginal man locating the centre of the work in Australia and suggesting the displacement of indigenous peoples. The work also incorporates multiple voices and visions from other places (New Zealand, France, Latvia, South America and Germany, to mention a few). There are numerous symbols relating to mortality and ritual across different cultures including the cross in Colin McCahon's *The five wounds of Christ no.3* 1977–78 and another symmetrically placed cross on the vibrant green chasuble (a vestment worn at mass) originally designed by Matisse for the chapel at Vence. The word 'Nezinams' refers to a tombstone for unknown Latvian soldiers set amongst several other funerary images.

On the one hand patterns of rupture are present in large and intimate signs of remembrance. On the other hand the cycles of nature are metaphors for regeneration: in allusions to rocks and clouds in McCahon, in the spiky



Diaspora 1992 oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvasboards
 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

yellow flowering details on the Matisse vestment, in the unexpected inclusion of four superimposed panels of leaf imagery based on photocopies of actual leaves that Tillers made and repainted, and in a cut-out shape of a flowering iris that is one of the first references to the German Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge. In the epic picture of *Farewell to reason* the Runge image is a modest inclusion. Yet his interest in this artist who found new ways of reconceptualising landscape through nature symbolism would flow in wave upon wave through the next phase of Tillers' art: in works such as the *Nature speaks* series 1998–2006.

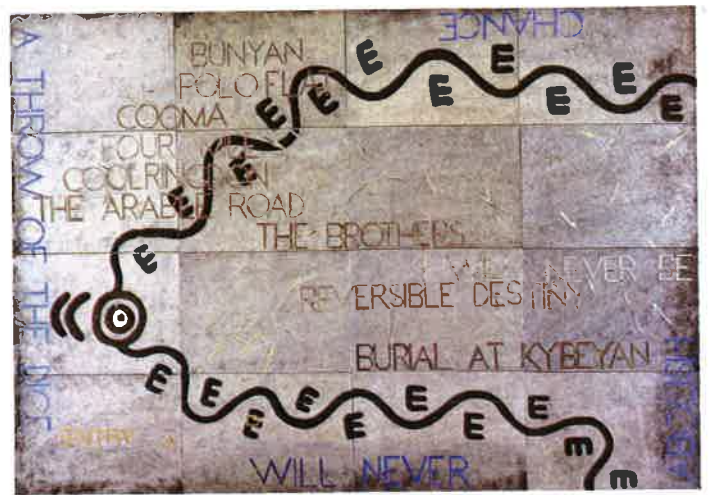
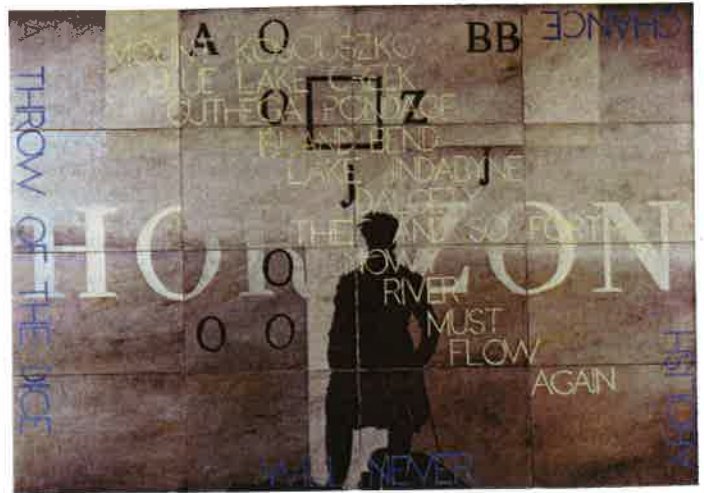
Nature speaks: when locality prevails

By 1998, the groundwork was set for a dynamic interweaving of two aspects of Tillers' approach to painting the web of interconnections between all things and an increasing recognition of the significance of place. The shift in subject matter towards locality was inseparable from the move Tillers made with his family to Coromandel in late 1996 where he became inspired by the varied local environment: the garden at their family home Blairgowrie; the expansive terrain of the surrounding Monaro region; and the proximity to the Snowy Mountains. Correspondences with landscape make their presence felt in a non-literal way – as evocations of nature through text

references including place names and excerpts of poetry and sensuous layered visual elements.

Drawing upon a poetic analogy of symbolist poets and artists, the title *Nature speaks* suggests that nature has its own voice or language. In particular Tillers was referring to the Latvian poet Ilze Kalnāre who wrote: 'The rock speaks, the mountain speaks, every ear of corn speaks, every tree and field, in a language so intimate and familiar.'² The *Nature speaks* series comprises over one hundred sixteen-panel works that contain multiple variations as well as certain constants. As Tillers noted: 'At first glance the series appears to proceed like an algorithm because of the repetition of certain elements within each work – like the word "horizon"; the Mallarméan mantra "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance"; the Tau cross of Colin McCahon's "load-bearing structures"; and the ubiquitous cherubim of Philipp Otto Runge from his unfinished Gesamtkunstwerk "The Times of Day".'³

In the *Nature speaks* series some works allude to Tillers' ongoing connection with a German Romantic tradition as in *Nature speaks (Kosciusko)* and *Nature speaks: D*. Both include a figure that closely resembles Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a misty sea* c.1818. If Tillers allows the cool romantic light of the Snowy Mountains to envelop the dream-like atmosphere of *Nature speaks*



Nature speaks: AU 2002
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache on 16 canvasboards,
Private collection, Melbourne

Nature speaks: D 2000
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache on 16 canvasboards,
Private collection

Nature speaks: AT 2002
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache on 16 canvasboards,
Canberra Museum and
Gallery

Nature speaks (Kosciuszko)
1999 synthetic polymer
paint, gouache on 16
canvasboards,
Private collection, Melbourne

Imants Tillers and Michael
Jagamara Nelson
Nature speaks: AD 2002
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache on 16 canvasboards,
Private collection, Brisbane

Nature speaks: AQ 2001
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache on 16 canvasboards,
Australian National University,
Canberra



(Kosciusko), in *Nature speaks: D* he also reminds us that painting is an illusion. The abstracted dot-screen over the landscape suggests different ways of seeing and thinking about art, evoking constellations piercing the night sky. In other works in the series there is an almost Dada sense of absurdity, as in *Nature speaks: AU* where the silhouette of a man on a bicycle perched on a weather vane over the horizon suggests the variability and strangeness of existence as we try to navigate through the labyrinth of memory and contemporary experience.

In a series that reflects upon the significance of landscape Tillers felt that he could not overlook the power of much contemporary Aboriginal art. While *Nature speaks: VI* recalls the paintings of Emily Kam Ngwarrray, works such as *Nature speaks: AD* are the result of collaborations with Michael Jagamara Nelson. In these works space is seen from above. In contrast to repeated references to the horizon, the alternative inscription appears in a number of works: 'There is no horizon', conveying an alternative way of conceptualising place. In *Nature speaks: AT*, Tillers locates us in the landscape through glowing yellow tones and through place names such as The 'Jenny' Brothers, Cooroo, Kybeyan and on to Myalla, Nimmitabel and Gaerloch in the region around Tillers' home. With the additional inscription of 'out)back' in this work we are reminded of a journey that he made into the interior of Australia in 2000 (also recalled in *Nature speaks: BK* 2004). The experience was an enlivening one for him, coming at a time when his deepening feeling for

place was resonating in his art. As he wrote, 'it was an exhilarating and panoramic experience that changed my perception of our vast and beautiful continent'.⁴

Throughout the *Nature speaks* series, the mantra from Mallarmé's late daring poem *Un coup de dés*, 'A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE', inscribed in blue around the edges of the works is a continual reminder of the importance of chance correspondences that run through all of his works. The exhibition *Imants Tillers: one world many visions* reveals that it is possible to engage with multiple correspondences and transformations on a journey through different stages and aspects of the artist's works from 1984 to the present. It opens up intriguing possibilities for our engagement with a distinctive and intriguing approach to art-making in Tillers' canvasboard system: in stacks on the ground; in an intimate installation of the boards on music stands titled *Telepathic music* 1994, in the fluctuating rhythms of the *Nature speaks* series and in some of the largest and most accomplished paintings undertaken in Australia. ■

Deborah Hart
Senior Curator, Australian Painting and Sculpture

notes

- 1 Pierre Restany in *Diaspora in context: connections in a fragmented world*, Pori Art Museum, Finland, 1995, p. 73
- 2 Imants Tillers, 'When locality prevails', *Heat 8*, new series, ed. Ivor Indyk, Giramondo Publishing Company, Artarmon NSW, p. 115
- 3 Imants Tillers, 'When locality prevails', *Heat 8*, new series, p. 114
- 4 Imants Tillers quoted in Ashley Crawford, 'Centre grounds Tillers', *The Age*, sighted in the following website on 5 December 2005: www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/12/05

Telepathic music 1994
synthetic polymer paint,
gouache
9 K brand music stands,
randomly grouped
Collection of the artist