

# Tillers's art of therapy

ARTIST Imants Tillers is a man dogged by good fortune. For one thing, he is to be honoured next week in a retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, which has been collecting his work since the 1970s. For another, he is easily Australia's most successful contemporary artist on the international scene. And for another, he enjoys a family life that would be the envy of many creative practitioners.

I caught up with Tillers at his Cooma home on Monday, a freezing day but one that showed off the European qualities of an environment where the four seasons flourish with vigour. Though a gardener was busy heaving huge rocks into position around a formal pond ("I've done my share of work on it too," Tillers observes) the setting resembles nothing so much as Monet's Giverny, which I have visited in winter, full of promise and potential and thus a constant source of inspiration to an artist.

Tillers and his family moved to Cooma 10 years ago after an out-of-the-blue offer of a property on a block near the middle of town but light-years away considering the privacy of the surrounding trees and garden.

I'm obviously lucky to catch Tillers. If he's not in New York or Paris, he's in Sydney, where he was born to Latvian refugee parents almost 56 years ago and where he is now a trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW. His wife Jenny is in Sydney watching their 14-year-old daughter Saskia play the cello at the Opera House as part of a school's showcase. Their 21-year-old daughter Isidore, studying viola at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, will join Saskia at the National Gallery at the opening on July 14 by playing a Beethoven work in celebration of his show.

"This music thing is fantastic," Tillers says, putting on a CD that ensures our discussion is conducted to a thoroughly civilised background.

He likes to read everything he can

*Helen Musa speaks to Cooma-based artist Imants Tillers about his life, his work and an artist's search for fulfilment*

about art. Tillers gestures towards a huge bookcase on one wall of his studio. "I like libraries, I like books, I like being in books."

Life wasn't always so comfortable. His parents arrived as refugees in 1950 and crammed into a house with other Latvian families in the southern Sydney suburb of Sylvania. As a child Tillers saw the sacrifices of his parents, who worked to pay back the fare for their passage here and studied hard — his father upgraded his draftsman's qualifications to become a mechanical engineer, and built a house in an area still little more than bush.

But Tillers was bright and found

visual and design subjects that, he says, gave him as good a grounding in art as he would have got at East Sydney Tech, now the National Art School. A useful sideline was that in 1969 he and a lot of other students helped the artist Christo wrap Little Bay, Sydney, in one of the most celebrated installations of the era. That gave him an "in" to the Contemporary Art Society, with which he exhibited in 1973. That year he was taken on by Watters Gallery in Sydney, which gave Tillers his first solo show. In 1980 he was exhibited by the National Gallery of Victoria in the show *Survey 13*.

sentimental journey to Latvia.

Tillers had a six-month studio residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris and enjoyed some of the more traditional pursuits of a painter. Back in Sydney, he took a teaching job at Sydney College of Art in Rozelle while Jenny worked as an archaeologist, travelling to Pompeii in Italy.

In 1984 Tillers was offered a place in the *Australian Accent* show at P.S.1 Gallery in New York and sales soared. He gave up work, managing on an "up-and-down path" ever since. He and Jenny have survived 20 years on his art. He says "it's the only way to do justice to yourself as an artist".

It's paid off. Since 1984, he's had more than 44 solo exhibitions every-

emotion that rushed through me".

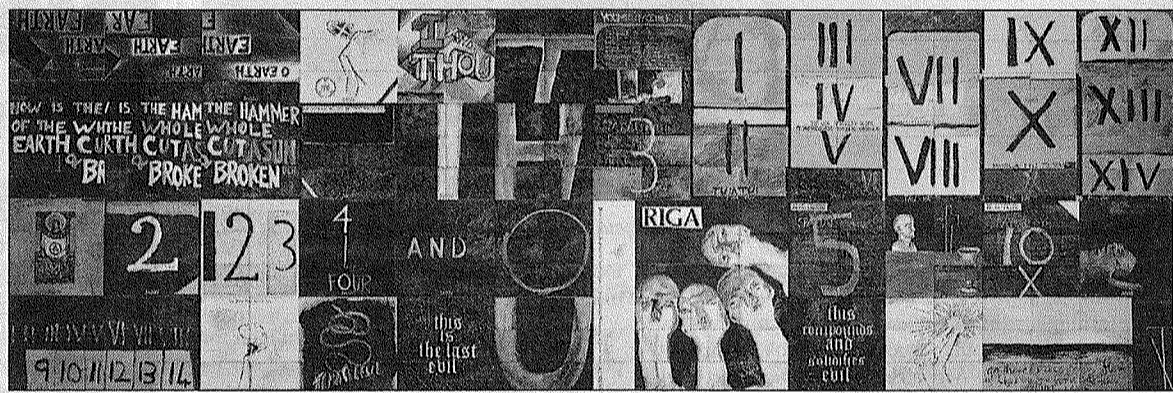
For him, emotion and ideas cannot be presented "in an old way". His solution has been to present landscapes and people with verbal overlays hinting at the emotions guiding his brush.

One large canvas board work hanging in his studio, part of *The Blossoming* series begun in 2004, is a direct response to his garden. Words like "How I wish I could know who I am" are inscribed over what appear to be markings and signs more familiar in maps, or in Aboriginal paintings that track the land and its fauna.

Indeed in one of the larger canvas board works for his NGA exhibition, *Terra Incognita 2005*, part of the huge *Nature Speaks* series of more than 100 16-panel works, Tillers names all of the 460 Aboriginal tribal groups of Australia and pays homage to the "tracks" in the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye's works, one of which hangs on his lounge room wall.

Did I say canvas boards? Readers even just a little bit familiar with Tillers's work will know of the "Book of power" canvas boards he's been using since 1981. Back in 1999, when I was interviewing him for an exhibition, *Home Visitation*, at Chapman Gallery in Manuka, he told me how he had once broken two huge paintings into many canvas squares, put them in a packet and airmailed them to Macs Gallery in London. That's the practical side of it. On an intellectual level, Tillers is numbering his canvases like the pages of a book he's up to 80,000. He says, "This continual movement of panels — the endless cycle of constitution, dispersions, reconstitution and so on — is fundamental to my world."

But the reality is much more pragmatic. When you live in Australia, Tillers explains, such a long distance from the centres of the art world, you have to come up with a way of transporting your work. He has been known to travel around the world with his paintings in a suit-



BOXED IN: 'Diaspora', 1992, oilstick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvas boards.

himself attending a physics summer school at Sydney University at age 16. Surely, his father thought, he would be at least a scientist. Conscripted in his first year of tertiary studies, deferred the call-up by hanging around campus as an architecture student long enough to see Gough Whitlam drop the draft in 1972.

Tillers looks on his period at university — he graduated Bachelor of Science with honours in architecture and won the university medal — at a privileged time during which he was introduced to radical ideas about architecture and to a broad range of

He was on the way up.

His father was bitterly disappointed that he hadn't pursued a "proper" profession, though he did work for a landscape architect when first out of university. That parental disapproval is something Tillers still grapples with, even after his father's death.

Offered a place by curator George Baldessin at the San Paolo Biennale in 1975, which came with a grant of \$4000, Tillers set off with Jenny, an archaeologist whom he had just met, to see the world. They stayed away for two years, travelling in Brazil, France, England and even taking a

where from New York to London-derry and all around Australia.

To Tillers, art comes from inside. He is not afraid to use the word "therapy" to describe the way art can help an artist achieve fulfilment. "There are quite a few unresolved issues arising out of my background, my childhood," he says. "Art is a good way of resolving them."

He also believes that to be an artist you must appreciate other people's art, and music too. His great childhood idol was Vincent Van Gogh, and on his first visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam he was "quite unprepared for the flood of

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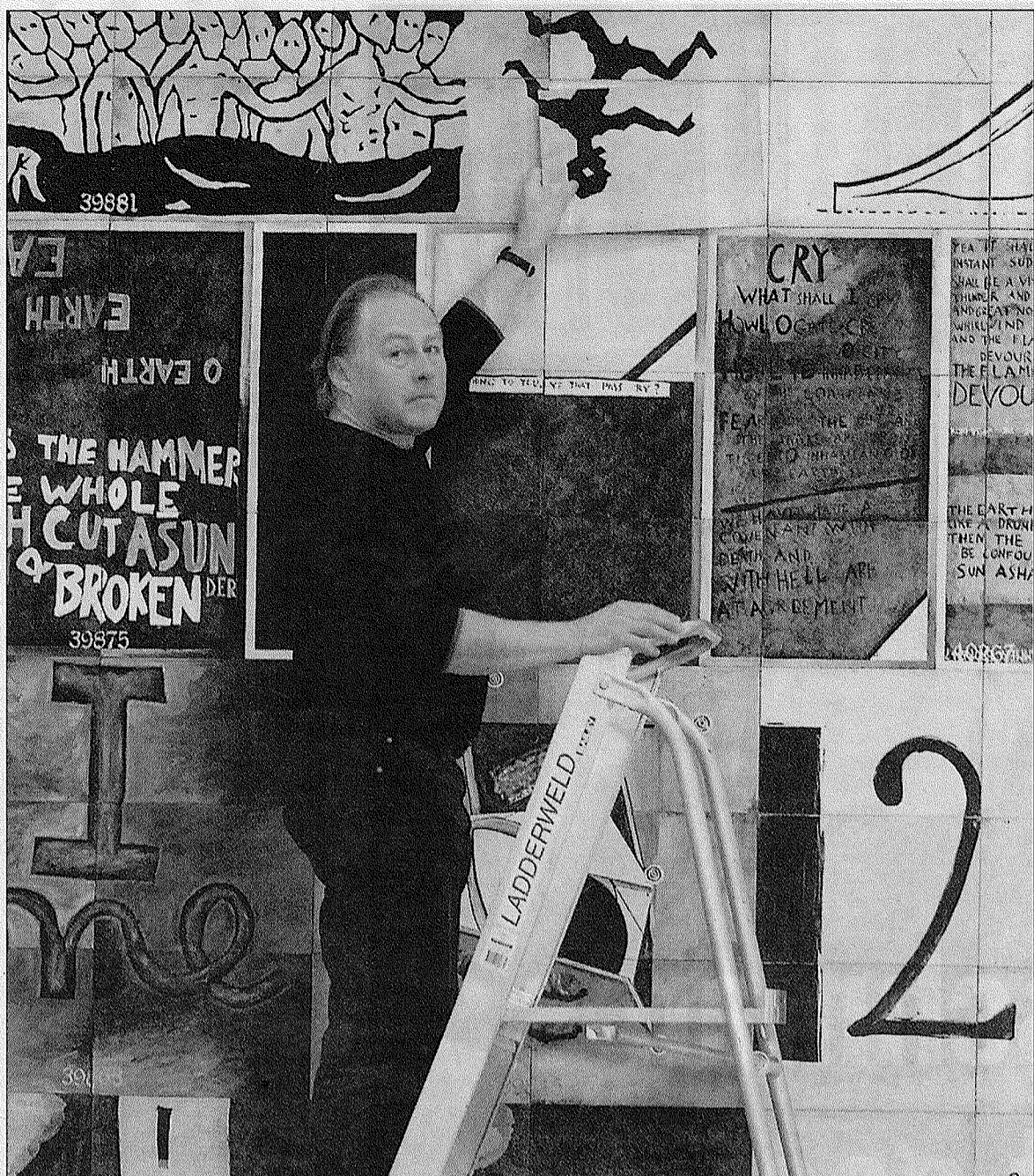
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Pendant (tuinga); shell, bone, teeth, cord; Tonga; l. 12 cm. Images courtesy of the University of Göttingen; photographers Harry Haase and Michael Tropea



**ART WORLD:** Imants Tillers sets up his exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, left. His works can be broken down into many small canvas boards and packed away, above. Main picture: Martin Jones

case, reassembling them as he and Jenny were doing on Tuesday, using Velcro spots to stick them to the walls. Of course there are artistic resonances. If you think, for instance, of the way Michelangelo would have planned the Sistine Chapel, squares, though not canvas ones, would have played an important part. It's radical but it's also

traditional. To a painter the canvas squares are a boon, he says. Once you've planned your larger painting you settle down and simply work on a small canvas at a time. So much less daunting than a huge canvas.

This is not the first major retrospective for Tillers. In 1999, Charles Merewether, now director of the Sydney Biennale, staged a retrospec-

tive of his work, *Towards Infinity*, at the Marco Museo Contemporaneo in Monterrey, Mexico.

That was after his representative Karen Lovegrove moved to Los Angeles and cultivated art connections in that part of the world. More than 200,000 people came to the Monterrey show, he says, creating huge exposure and attracting

important buyers. "You have to take these opportunities," Tillers says, who knows you have to be represented by top galleries to survive. He predicts that the NGA's *Imants Tillers: one world, many visions* will be far more in-depth than its predecessor. The NGA show will not only be an honour for him, but will be of "more significance".

The NGA's curator, Deborah Hart, whose catalogue will be in effect a new book on his work, selected three rooms' worth of works covering three different periods over the past 20 years.

Among the works on show will be his 1985 Kosciuszko painting called *Mount Analogue*, his huge visual homage to Eugene Von Guerard's Kosciuszko painting, made up of 165 canvas boards.

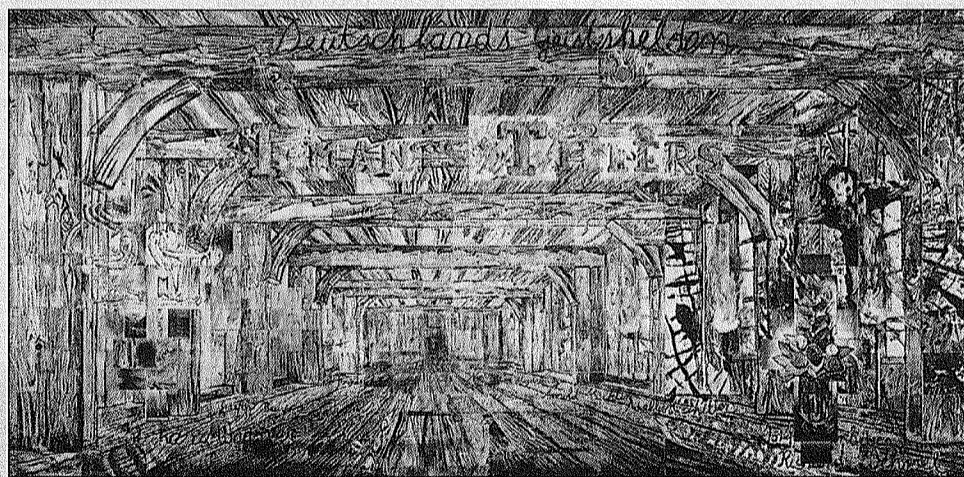
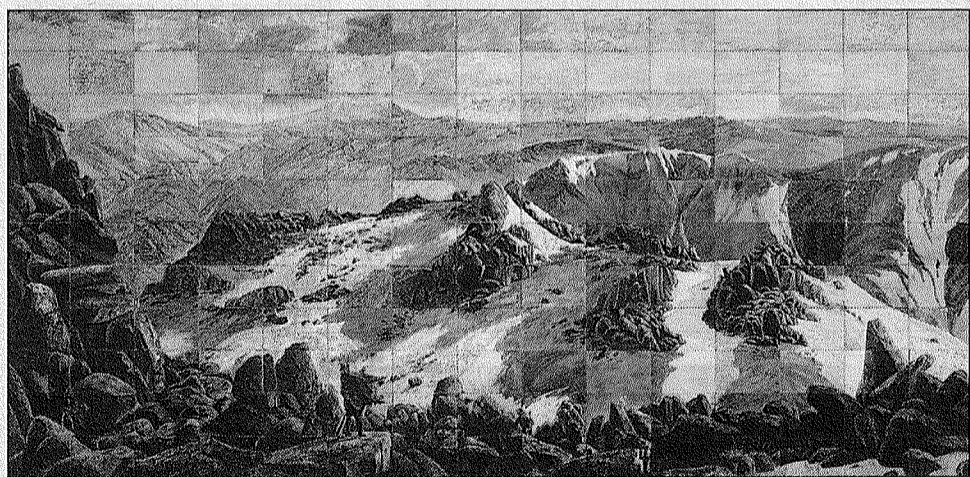
The first room will show work seen at the 42nd Venice Biennale in 1986. The second will feature his *Diaspora* works, four 10m-wide

paintings dealing with the dispersion of peoples, including Latvians, around the world.

In the last room is work from his Monaro period, including works from his *Nature Speaks* series and *Terra Incognita*, where he pays tribute to the 460 known tribal groups of Aboriginal Australia. Tillers says he has long wanted to take up issues of Aboriginal dispossession and he has sent a similar painting to the Sydney Biennale.

Tillers, though successful on the international stage, is nonetheless quintessentially Australian. He has found a "spirit of place in the Monaro and that, increasingly is what he wants to express."

**Imants Tillers: one world, many visions** will be at the NGA from July 14 to October 16. Combined entry for Imants Tillers and Michael Riley exhibition: \$10 adults, \$7 members/concession. Visit [www.nga.gov.au](http://www.nga.gov.au)



**ON BOARD:** Tillers's 'Mount Analogue', 1985, oilstick, synthetic polymer paint on 165 canvas boards, left; 'Heart of the wood', 1985, oilstick, oil, synthetic polymer paint on 338 canvas boards, right.

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NFSA Cinémathèque at the Electric Shadows Cinemas presents:

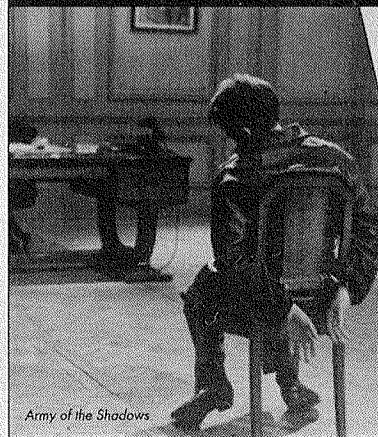
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