

# Rustic calm of a panel man

On the eve of his first important retrospective, Imants Tillers says he's become less constrained about playing with emotion, writes Rosalind Wiseman

**T**URN left at the creek, go around the showground and keep going until you get to the cypress lane. These are the directions to painter Imants Tillers's property, south of Canberra, and Blairgowrie is as rustic and pretty as it sounds.

Ten years ago the family moved to the 17ha property, which sits in a hollow of the land, where there are bulbs ready to explode at the first touch of spring, sketchy bare branches, rich cypresses, old native pines, drystone walls. A circular pond winks like an eye in the centre of the garden. Tillers lives in a century-old homestead with his partner and archivist, Jennifer Slatyer, two daughters and assorted animals.

It's often repeated that Tillers is his generation's most important artist; he is certainly our most internationally recognised. He came to notice early in his career, with works selected for the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1975, Documenta 7 in Germany in 1982 and the 1986 Venice Biennale, and with a swag of critically acclaimed group shows and solo exhibitions at leading public galleries in New York, London and Paris.

Later this month, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra will open the first important retrospective of Tillers in this country. One World/Many Visions will explore the big themes of his work from 1981 onwards, including the *Diaspora* series from the mid-'90s, an unseen work from 2005, *Terra incognita*, and his ongoing *Nature Speaks* series.

Most artists seek solitude. Tillers's studio is at the heart of the house: walk through the dining room, where pretty vases of jonquils and bowls of lemons sit beside heaps of art books, towards the bedrooms, and there it is. Under the yellow ceiling of this former sitting room, a massive fireplace suitable for the highlands chill lies unused, hidden by a table with pots of paint and short stacks of what appear to be small white books.

There are similar, taller stacks grouped against one wall: not books but canvas boards. Tillers's large-scale works sometimes comprise 300 of these individually painted boards. They are all "pages" in his ever-growing *Book of Power*. He began working on the *Book* in 1981, and shortly after he began numbering individual boards. He has reached 80,000 and is still going strong (the petite blonde Slatyer has a lifetime's work ahead keeping track of them).

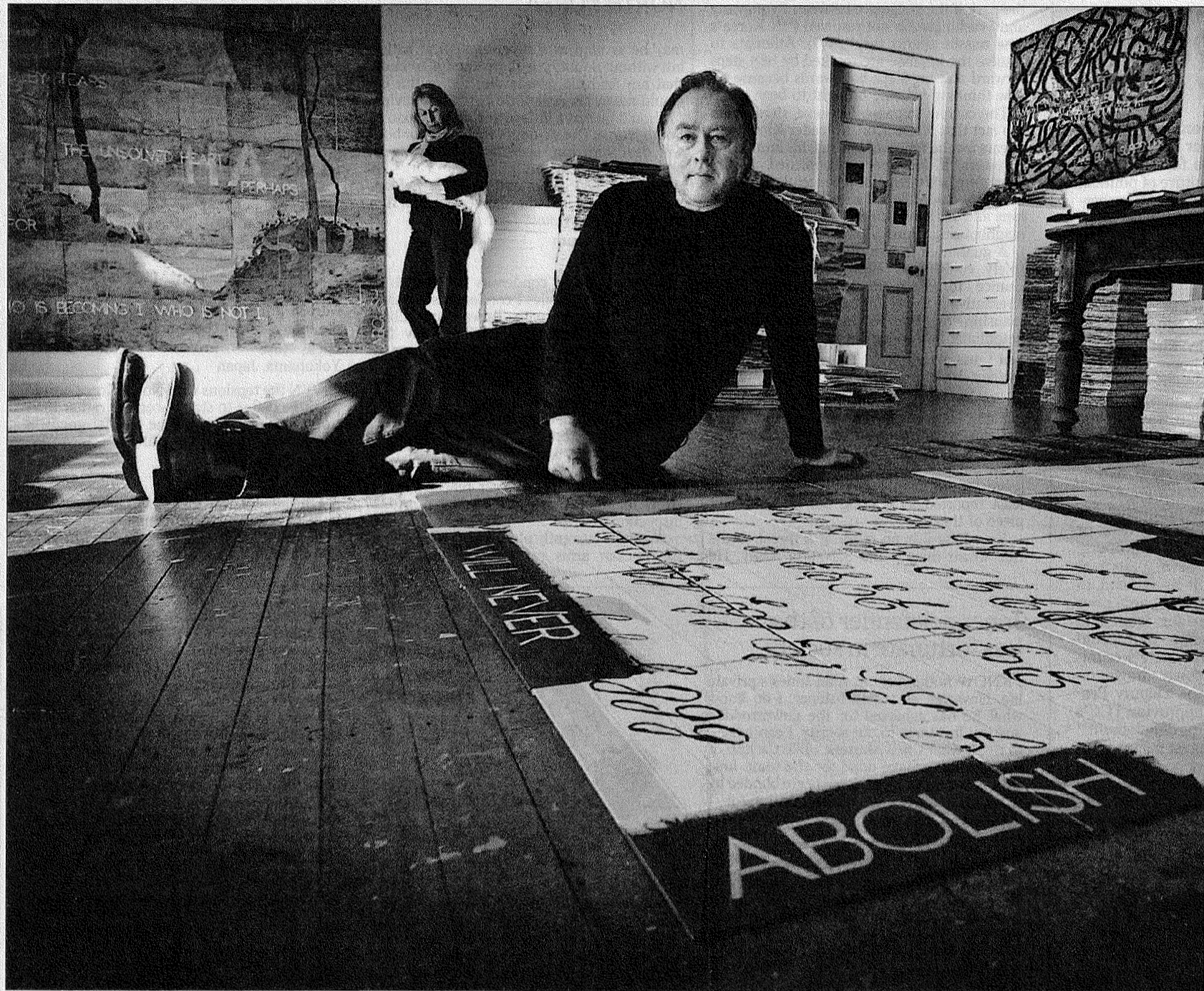
At 56, Tillers is a quietly spoken man. This calm belies an immense curiosity and boundless energy. When he pulls out a notebook, he casually mentions it is one of 3000 aides-memoire, full of sketches and quotes. He is rigorous too: he has almost 50 books and catalogues on Giorgio de Chirico, for example. "I have a full picture of the artists I am interested in." Among his favourites are the French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme, German painter Philipp Otto Runge who lived fast and died young, Caspar David Friedrich, the German gothic landscape artist, and Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

Tillers's desk, where he works, faces the garden through a picture window. Almost certainly he experiences moments of rapture: while working he is pretty much lost to the world. Slatyer explains that he forgets to eat, to talk, to answer the phone. "He doesn't feel he needs anyone else, so it's quite confronting for him to have to connect with the family," she says.

He works board by board, painting in layers, using gouache, oilsticks and polymer paint, a meticulous process that means he must hold on to a mental picture of the sum of the parts. He often has three or four different pieces on the go at the same time.

The canvasboard assemblies came about partly by serendipity, partly by design. In the early days, when he was on his artistic P-plates, studio space was tight and so was money. Canvasboard is relatively cheap; he couldn't always afford canvas. His system enabled him to make sizeable paintings and also transport them easily. One very large work went off to a gallery in London in four cardboard boxes.

Tillers's life as an artist began when he was studying architecture at Sydney University under a free-wheeling Californian academic who encouraged his students to immerse themselves in the wider art scene. Another rather pressing reason kept him at university:



**His generation's most important artist:** Imants Tillers, with Jennifer Slatyer and the family dog, Lilly, in the studio of their homestead near Cooma, NSW

his number had come up in the national conscription lottery and students were exempt from service. He jokes that his thesis was about art rather than architecture; nevertheless he won the University Medal. He had his first exhibition at Watters Gallery in Sydney the same year.

Tillers was born in Australia, the first child of Latvian immigrants who arrived penniless in 1949. After a stint in Bathurst they set up home on the outskirts of southern Sydney. He was a talented boy, excelling in maths, science, art.

"I was certainly encouraged to paint and draw. In a way I had a very Latvian upbringing, a very closeted childhood, speaking Latvian at home, Latvian school every Saturday. I graduated from Latvian high school — three of us, doing the exams in Latvian. I've lost it now. There was a kind of reticence about me having Australian friends, like the normal things of having friends around. I didn't have that."

When Tillers was four, his younger brother died from a mystery illness. "It was a horrific event for my parents and for me, too, and they just closed down their world." He pulls out a little pen drawing of a typical fibro suburban house. "Whenever it rained there would be buckets everywhere, the wind would howl down the corridor. My parents shared with two other families: they came here with nothing at all. It's taken a while to fully understand the circumstance that they must have had, and how kind of alone they were, without any family support. And they were only 25."

Soon enough, he rebelled against the strictures of being a well-behaved Latvian boy. "Around 17 I started to resent it, the feeling of responsibility. Jenny's one aspect of that, because she wasn't Latvian," he says

fondly. Jenny recalls: "We'd spend most of our time going to Baltic balls and Latvian confirmations."

He realised that the art world offered an escape, although his parents disapproved. "Art's actually a form of therapy: in profound times, when there are a lot of personal things and cultural issues, you can just play around with them if you're an artist. You don't have to solve them, just be meditating on them. It's a form of release. Art's not a solution to real life problems, but while exploring no one's going to get hurt."

At first Tillers resisted the urge to use his personal history, but came to understand it was inescapable. "[Writer and academic] Ivor

you're interested in other artists in a kind of inauthentic way, just trying to inflate your own practice somehow."

His 1986 painting *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* confirmed Tillers's status as a postmodernist poster boy, the complexity of his work exciting semioticians and critics. He even occasionally would reuse his canvas boards and paint over an older work, thus delighting theorists (and alarming Slatyer) with other, now invisible, layers to analyse. Even better, his works were all part of the one open-ended project. Tillers says he has never read the texts of Foucault or Derrida, yet it's obvious that, for him, connections are everything.

**'I have fun with my art now because I don't feel bound by expectations . . . it's purely following my impulses'**

Imants Tillers, artist

Indyck says that waves of migrants bring with them this experience of catastrophe: it's a kind of recognised element in the Australian psyche," he says. "We're all supposed to be enjoying the lucky country, but these experiences they've bought with them are passed on in one way or another. In the 1970s I did work that was about other art or systems or concepts, but as I got older I realised that the important things to express were your own experiences, from your own background, whatever you are."

He understands the pull of two cultures: "You can be Australian but also have a connection to that European heritage, which actually includes people like Joseph Beuys or Anselm Kiefer or Edvard Munch: it's a real cultural connection. Otherwise you feel that

Some connections are clear, such as the dry golden tones of the alpine tundra reflected in panels on the studio wall, part of his *Nature Speaks* series. Others are related to personality: an affinity with maps and systems of all kinds reflect a deep love of order. Still others are emotional, familial, even romantic. He says the words that float among the colours of his paintings are not there to be translated literally, but to generate allusions.

Much of last year was spent making two very large paintings, each comprising 288 boards. *Terra negata*, which is on display in the Sydney Biennale at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the as yet unseen *Terra incognita*, which he calls a homage to indigenous Australia, are both "a lament for

the tragedies of all the lost and culture of Australia, I honour roll to the resurgences revealed to the wider world painting."

The background image Kngwarreye's web of lines *Dreaming*, which Tillers psychic as well as geographic. Tillers came under fire for of indigenous motifs. Artist Gordon Bennett produced *chets (Fall Down Black Whitefella)* using Latvian to Tillers's *The Nine Shots* painted by Papunya artists Jagamara, among its other and Jagamara have since landscape *Nature Speaks* (ing).

Tillers says intellect always been present in different proportions. "No constrained about playing. In fact I find that powerful if there is essentially use all the resources available to make the best he says.

"I have fun with my art don't feel bound by expectations and an agenda as such. It's purely impulses."

On the highway toward a large traffic sign, the divided into squares. On or "Love me". While it's Mallarme's poetry, perhaps Tillers has left his mark on Imants Tillers: One World, NGA Canberra, July 14-Oct

## Say, big sister, them's fighting words

### THEATRE

**Unspoken**  
Written and performed by Rebecca Clarke.

Vitalstatistix and Performing Lines. Waterside, Port Adelaide, July 5. Tickets: \$15-\$20. Bookings: (08) 8175 2114. Until



## Stylish return of museum

**T**HE best thing about this version of *La Clemenza di Tito* is the production, first staged in 1991. Director Moffat Oxenbould took his cue from Goran Jarvefelt's acclaimed interpretation for the Drottningholm Opera House in Sweden. As with his *Madama Butterfly*, Oxenbould

### OPERA

**La Clemenza di Tito**  
By Mozart. Opera Austral Jonathan Darlington. Dir. Oxenbould. Sydney Opera House. Tickets: \$96-\$220. Book