

Two decades of Tillers' work

By Sasha Grishin

Ilmanis Tillers is Australia's most successful biennale artist. By the time he was 25, together with George Baldessin, he represented Australia at the Sao Paulo Bienal. A few years later he was in Documenta, in Kassel, and by 1986 represented Australia at the Venice Biennale.

From 1979 to 2006 he has been a regular exhibitor at the Sydney Biennale, not to mention biennales and triennials in Beijing, Osaka, Krakow, together with major survey exhibitions of contemporary art throughout Australia, Europe and the Americas.

Now he is the subject of a major survey exhibition at the National Gallery, one of very few that have originated at this gallery to be dedicated to a living non-indigenous artist. He is certainly an artist who has the runs on the board.

Tillers is a cerebral artist and one of

exceptional persistence and consistency. Very early in life he made a number of critical decisions which have conditioned his practice through to the present. He decided that he was to primarily recycle imagery appropriated from other artists, rather than work from primary observation from nature. He also devised a system of working on small canvas boards, usually preferred by amateur painters, and from 1981 onwards has numbered them, so that he is now approaching canvas board number 80,000. It is an open-ended system for recording and communicating information with a potential for flexibility in the ordering of the panels and their interpretation.

It also means that he can work on a small scale and then assemble up to 300 panels to create truly enormous compositions. This is a Janus-faced process, moving forwards while constantly looking backwards, and an absolute gift for curators and academics who can engage with the popular postmodernist agenda.

While some artists draw their support primarily from their peers, brothers and sisters of the brush, others from the general public, Tillers' popularity lies with curators, academics and some art critics.

As with many Australians of his generation, particularly Greeks, Italians and Slavs, Tillers was born in Australia to migrant parents who fled Europe after WWII. They live in a diaspora, often attending ethnic Sunday schools, while in everyday life trying to blend into Australian society. They are caught between the culture of their parents and that of Australia.

Tillers' parents were Latvian, so as with many Australians from the Baltic region, Eastern Europe, former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, there were political imperatives which made a premature return to their homeland impractical. This journeying back and forth in physical and emotional space is a constant theme in Tillers' work, at times quite explicitly as in his *Diaspora* series, on

other occasions in less overt forms.

Unlike so many Australian artists who turn to Anglo-American art or French modernism, Tillers seems to find solace in the Germanic tradition and Kiefer, Baselitz, Polke, Beuys, Ernst, Friedrich, Bommels, von Guerard and Runge have, at different times, played a role in his art.

The beauty of the National Gallery exhibition is that it surveys Tillers' development over the past two decades and the generous spaces of galleries permit us to see the multi-panel compositions (secured to the walls through a myriad of Velcro do in their full monumental splendour

The earlier works are simpler in conception and less convincing in execution. In some ways by drawing direct parallel with von Guerard and Colin McCahon, Tillers' appropriation (largely in oil stick) appear less convincing. A decade later, the complexity of his appropriation has largely annulled any direct stylistic parallels.

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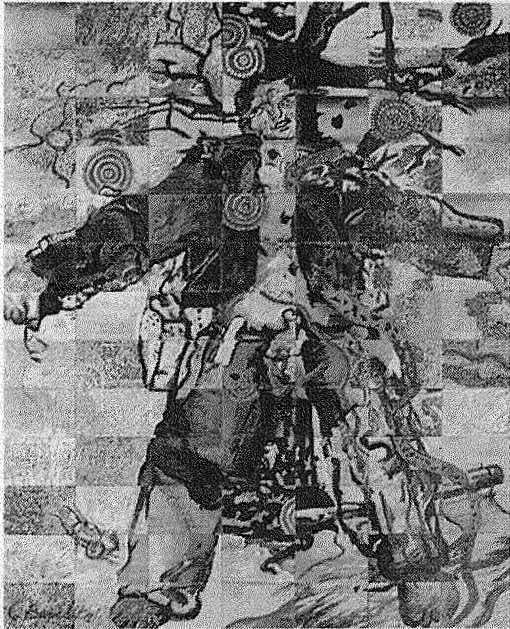
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Facing page: *Diaspora*, 1992, oil stick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 228 canvasboards (detail)
Below: *The nine shots*, 1985, synthetic polymer paint and oil stick on 91 canvasboards.



Above: *Nature speaks*, 2005, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 16 canvasboards.

now on show

Deborah Hart, the curator of this exhibition, notes in her excellent and scholarly monographic catalogue, that Tiller's "noted that whereas he had quoted from a total of about 200 different artists in over 400 works produced between 1981 and 1992, *Paradiso*, 1994, alone encodes information from more than 30 different art sources"

The final room of the exhibition brings us up-to-date with his most recent work executed on his property near Cooma. Here there is a greater awareness of landscape and space and a greater fluidity in the surfaces, at least in part due to the use of the acrylic medium. Appropriations from Aboriginal art collide with an obsessive preoccupation with Runge's cherubims, applied almost like a stencil or a stamp to the surface. It marks Tiller's journey into a conceptual

and iconographic complexity, as well as noting his growing technical maturity as a painter.

This is an important exhibition which provides us with a rare opportunity to assess for ourselves the work of one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary artists. If there is a note of criticism concerning this exhibition, I regret that there is an entry charge, no matter how small. Indigenous art, photography and contemporary art are rarely exhibitions which attract big crowds and yet they should be seen by as many people as possible.

Why not let Egyptian art from the Louvre, which opens at the gallery in November, pay for major exhibitions of Australian art?

Imants Tiller: One world / many visions, National Gallery of Australia, until October 16.

pick of the menu

VISUAL

The ANU School of Art Gallery in Ellery Crescent Acton has *Journey to Morning*, a series of photographs, an entire night's sleep, by Blaide Lallemand and Hilary Cuerden-Clifford. Until July 29. Also showing *Regarding Retro: Reanimations of the Preloved*, until August 12.

10.30am-3pm. ANU School of Art Foyer Gallery.

STAGE

Under Milk Wood, starring former GP actor Michael Craig runs from July 27-29 at the Playhouse, Canberra Theatre. Bookings: 6275 2700

MUSIC

More than Flowers, solos and duets from opera and

operetta with works by Purcell, Mozart, Humperdinck will be performed at Wesley Music Centre, 20 National Circuit, Forrest today at 3pm. Tickets at the door

DANCE

Awkward, by Cadi McCarthy at 8pm today, in the Canberra Theatre's Courtyard Studio. Bookings: 6275 2700.

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