

The Shock of the Independent: Imants Tillers and Tony Clark in Melbourne

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LEFT: Art Projects installation view with John Nixon's/Imants Tillers' collaborative painting *Honour and Glory*, 1982, aka *The church and the cross*, which now hangs in the Art Gallery of South Australia. Photograph courtesy Melbourne University Art Museum.
RIGHT: Tony Clark installation view, Murray White Room, Melbourne 2008 (including his 4 metre-high *Putto David* painting, right).

In the early '80s, there were few galleries in Melbourne willing to take much of a risk – the key ones were Pinacotheca and Art Projects. At the time, Art Projects, initiated by John Nixon, was the hotbed of Australian avant-garde practice, where artists such as Mike Parr, Jenny Watson, Greg Ades and Brett Colquhoun found a home. Almost all of the artists that exhibited at Projects went on to have stellar careers, soon finding homes in such blue-chip galleries as Anna Schwartz in Melbourne and Roslyn Oxley9 and Yuill/Crowley in Sydney. Indeed, by the mid - to late '80s, it seemed – in terms of both media coverage and collectability – that Nixon had collated the *crème de la crème* of contemporary Australian art.

Gallery curators by and large failed to visit Art Projects' ramshackle space. The National Gallery of Victoria was a lunch-time walk away and yet visits from the 'official' art world were a distinct rarity. But the gallery's reputation spread internationally and important overseas curators and artists visiting Melbourne would make it to Art Projects. The founder of the Transavantgarde, Germano Celant, was one of these. His visit led to two Art Projects artists, Nixon and Imants Tillers, being chosen to represent Australia in the 1983 *Documenta*.

Nixon established Art Projects in a tatty office space at 566 Lonsdale Street in 1979. The alternative gallery was founded by Nixon in part as a backlash against the more conservative commercial spaces that existed in Melbourne at the time, and it rapidly became the locus for conceptual art in the city. Visiting Art Projects for the first time was a terrifying experience for the uninitiated; a time-worn space with a humble wooden table, and Nixon looking surly and

unfriendly. One's first response was to turn around and flee back down the stairs. But Nixon turned out to be a friendly and generous host.

Two of the artists who exhibited at Projects have recently held concurrent exhibitions in Melbourne. Aesthetically, Tony Clark and Imants Tillers could not be more different. The Latvian-born Tillers has embraced the Australian landscape while Clark, who now lives in Italy, has been inspired by Michelangelo. Both artists were initially trained as architects and both developed their work during the heady days of postmodern debate that was brewing in the pages of such magazines as *Art & Text* and *Tension*.

Times have most certainly changed. In the early '80s, Tillers and Clark were making do with the rough-and-tumble aesthetic of Art Projects. In 2008, Clark is showing at Murray White's recently opened, ultra-slick inner-city gallery while Tillers is exhibiting at the recently refurbished Arc One Gallery around the corner. Both galleries are indicative of the seismic shift that has occurred in Melbourne – and Australia in general – in the last three decades. There has been a massive injection of capital into the industry, and a new generation of serious collectors. In the days of Arts Projects, a large opening would consist of twenty or so people. Today, an equivalent opening would be closer to 200.

Tillers first exhibited at Projects in 1981 during the period in which he was beginning to utilise small canvas boards to create a larger image. Around the same time, Tillers was embracing the notion of appropriation. His initial forays into this approach at Projects came at a time when he was dabbling with imagery from Latvian children's books. This approach developed into Tillers' ongoing project, *The*



Tony Clark, *Myriorama*, (details: above, opposite page), 1985 – 1991, oil on canvasboard (12 panels). Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



ABOVE CENTRE: Installation view of Tony Clark's *Technical manifesto of town planning*, 1982, Art Projects, Melbourne. Photograph courtesy Melbourne University Art Museum. ABOVE: Tony Clark, *Putto Night & Putto Day*, 2008, acrylic and permanent marker on canvas (two panels). Courtesy the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne. Photograph by John Brash.

Book of Power, in which each numbered canvasboard can be 'read' as a page of a book. Tillers went on to 'quote' everyone from de Chirico to Colin McCahon. He was the cool Po-Mo artist par excellence. Then, in April 2000, he went bush.

The fascinating results since that time reveal that Tillers has not lost his tight, graphic sensibility. Nor has he lost his penchant for quoting other artists – there are hints aplenty of Fred Williams and Rosalie Gascoigne. But, rather than being cool exercises, the paintings glow with an almost romantic response to the landscape. Even the title of his recent show hints at the romantic – *Melancholy Landscape*. The works are littered with references to the locales he has visited: Cooma, Mildura, Broken Hill, Coober Pedy, William Creek, Lake Eyre, Alice Springs, Falls Creek, Bungle Bungles, Kununurra, Faraway Bay – an intense mélange of desert and jungle, endless plains and jutting mountains. While his early forays into the landscape were somewhat literal, his text in the most recent work is downright poetic; 'A Journey Unbroken', 'In The Garden of Love and Suffering', 'At Dawn' – a litany of intensely layered thoughts and feelings.

Being grounded and a sense of place are important themes in Tillers's work. He was born in 1950 to Latvian refugees who had arrived in Sydney, fleeing the Soviet invasion of their country. In the 1950s, such refugees were labelled DPs (Displaced Persons), and this disjointed cultural history contributed to Tillers's approach to his early work. In some ways, the works in the 2008 show are a logical extension for Tillers. In 1996, he moved from Sydney to Cooma in rural New South Wales where, he says, 'an

awareness of place and landscape have become significant factors in my work'.

Tony Clark first exhibited at Art Projects the year after Tillers, in 1982. Clark was also dabbling around the edges of appropriation; the works he was creating at that time involved investigations into the aesthetics of such artists as Claude and Poussin, tempered with a contemporary punk sensibility. Over the years, he has explored myriad elements of Classicism, at times bordering on pure abstraction. He has shifted from idyllic landscapes and pagan temples through to images ostensibly sourced from Wedgwood porcelain to experimentations with birds and flowers, all with a bold palette.

Clark's recent show, his first in Melbourne since 2002, retains the four-colour approach he has pursued over the last six years, restricting his colour scheme to sienna, black, pink and pale blue. His subject matter this time around is inspired by Michelangelo, including images sourced from the Medici Chapel and other projects by the Renaissance master. Deliberately eschewing Michelangelo's meticulous draughtsmanship, Clark has rendered these large works on canvas as bold sculptural shapes. Blue figures cavort against backgrounds of scratchy abstract fields of pink and sienna in images that are reminiscent of theatrical scenes.

Clark has spoken in the past of his first visit to an art museum and the impact that 'the shock of the old' had on him. This is a passion, it seems, that has never left Clark as he trawls the museums and cathedrals of Europe. What he takes from Michelangelo's artworks is the sense of scale and



Imants Tillers, *Suppressed Imagery 2*, 1982, pencil on 49 canvasboards. Courtesy the artist and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne.

solidity that the master achieved, but today it is inspiration rather than appropriation that Clark embraces.

One of the key things that struck viewers of Clark's show was the sheer scale of the works. Over the years, Clark has moved from small, intimate landscapes to paintings of ever-growing scale. These are works both inspired by and made for the museum. Many artists when tackling such a large scale lose any sense of composition. Not Clark, who tackles his behemoths with confidence and flair.

In 2005, twenty-six years after Art Projects first opened its doors (it finally closed due to lack of funding, in 1984), the director of the Monash University Museum of Art, Max Delany, curated an ambitious exhibition surveying three generations of artist-run spaces in Melbourne. Featuring Art Projects, Store 5 and 1st Floor, it was a

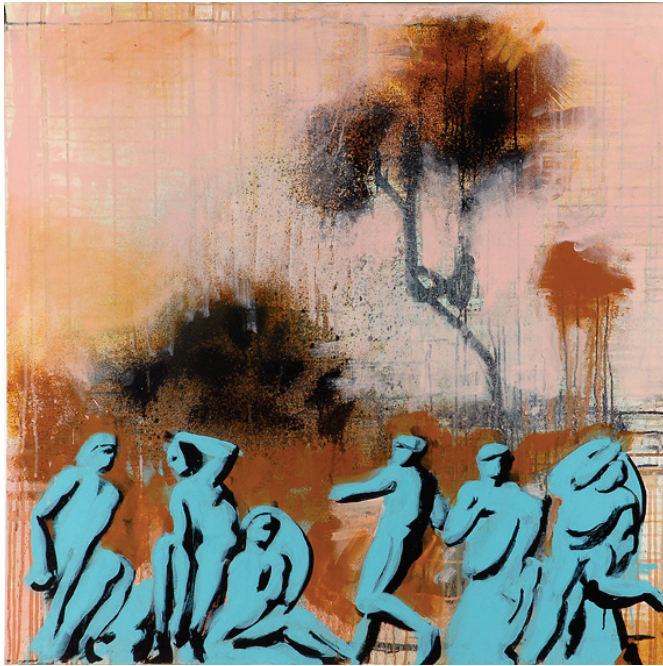
fascinating archaeological exercise that clearly unveiled the importance of independent spaces. The roll call of artists was impressive indeed – John Nixon, Imants Tillers and Tony Clark were all, naturally, given their due. But as the generations passed, artists such as Callum Morton, Rose Nolan, Ricky Swallow and Tony Garifalakis emerged from the younger spaces.¹

In 2007, Din Heagney, the co-director of Platform Artists Group – a renegade tear-away group who largely exhibit in a railway station – undertook the daunting task of surveying the significance of Artist-Run Initiatives (ARIs) in Melbourne. The resulting book, indeed quite a massive tome, documented twenty-one independent galleries and the artists that have emerged from them. ARIs such as Platform, Conical, Westspace, Bus and Kings have more than made their mark on Melbourne's cultural landscape.²

It is difficult, looking at the slick presentations of works by Tillers and Clark in top-end commercial galleries today, to recall their humble beginnings in the rather tatty space of Art Projects. Both artists in the early '80s were seriously cutting-edge. Clark would blue-tac his gorgeous landscapes to the wall where they would invariably fall, becoming decidedly bruised in the

process – part of the overall grunge effect he desired. Tillers would replicate Latvian children's books on amateur canvasboards, an obscure subject and approach, to say the least. Today, both artists' works reside in major museums across the country, but in 1981 it was nigh impossible to drag a state gallery curator to Art Projects – a wake-up call to curators everywhere.

As of writing I am nursing a severe hangover, having spent the previous afternoon at the closing 'ceremony' of a powerful exhibition by Tony Garifalakis at a new 'gallery' called Hells in Richmond. It is a tiny fluoro-lit room off an obscure laneway. Boutique German beer was flowing freely, despite the fact that the show was by no means a commercial endeavour. Garifalakis officially shows at Uplands Gallery, but that does not stop him exhibiting in an



Notes

1. The exhibition *Pitch Your Own Tent: Art Projects / Store 5 / 1st Floor* was held at Monash University Museum of Art, 23 June to 27 August 2005, and accompanied by an extensive publication.
2. The publication, *Making Space: artist run initiatives in Victoria*, 2007, a collection of essays edited by Din Heagney, was launched by the Platform Artists Group Inc, along with a festival program of exhibitions, forums, performances and workshops in Victorian artist-run initiatives from April to June 2007. [Reviewed AMA #202, 2007]

Imants Tillers's *Melancholy Landscape* was shown at Arc One Gallery, Melbourne, 13 March to 5 April 2008. Tony Clark's exhibition, *Tony Clark*, showed at Murray White Room gallery, Melbourne, 7 March to 5 April 2008.

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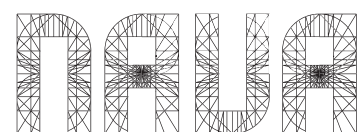
obscure artist-run space. It will not be reviewed in the newspapers or magazines (except for this mention) and, naturally there was not a curator in sight from the major museums. And, of course, back in 1981 and 1982, Tony Clark and Imants Tillers also showed in an obscure space with equally bad lighting. Some things never change. The good side is that these spaces persist, allowing experimentation and peer assessment. The intriguing thing is that the directors and curators at the major state institutions continue to miss out on where the action so often is.



RIGHT: Imants Tillers, *Blossoming 15*, 2006, acrylic, gouache on 54 canvasboards. Courtesy the artist and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne. ABOVE: Tony Clark, *Landscape III*, 2008, acrylic and permanent marker on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne. Photograph by John Brash.

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