

## AN AUSPICIOUS ENTANGLEMENT

*Every individual is the centre of a system of emanation*  
– Novalis

*We are "thrown" into the world: to be enduring, to be abiding,  
to be issuing forth, to be emerging*  
– Martin Heidegger

When I am painting on canvas board panels, I work at a desk which I protect with discarded newspapers. It is the same desk that I sit at when writing or paying the bills. It has been like this, working on the same desk, for over 30 years. Firstly in Mosman, Sydney, and today in 'Blairgowrie', Cooma, looking through the large window of my studio into an old frosty homestead garden. When I began to work with the canvas board panels (which, as the back of the Frederix brand declares, have been "serving artists around the world since 1868"), I decided to number all the panels consecutively from one to infinity. In 1981 I started with the numbers 1 to 49 in my very first canvas board work, which I called *Suppressed Imagery*. Just now I have finished the work *Nature Speaks: DX* (the 217th work in the 'Nature Speaks' series), which is numbered 91,471 to 91,486.

In recent years, however, as text has become equally important to me as image, I sometimes find that words leap out from the newspapers protecting my desk, often from sections that I would never normally bother reading, like 'Drive', 'Professional' or 'Property', and I cut them out to perhaps use in future works. I have become attracted to the ready made poetry of sub-editors! "Autumn a time of joy" is one such phrase that I have put into several paintings. Then there are tiny entries – brief news items or official notices that would never catch one's attention whilst reading the papers on a Saturday morning with a cup of coffee.

For example, there was this tragic story – like a vignette from a Thomas Bernhard anthology:

Miracle Over – MADRID: A man making a pilgrimage to say thank you to the "Virgin of Miracles" for his survival in a road crash was killed when a car hit him. The 40-year-old truck driver was among pilgrims, including his two aunts, walking from his hometown of Ordes to Caion when he was hit.

Bernhard, the great Austrian author, loved to collect such gleanings from the daily Viennese newspapers to work up into darkly hilarious stories of lunacy, murder, character assassination, amnesia and suicide. The idiocy of the real.

Then, a few months later, this extraordinary item caught my attention as I was painting:

In Memoriam – Bardon, Geoffrey Robert AM.  
2.8.1940 - 6.5.2003. In loving memory of our beloved husband and father – dearly loved and so sadly missed by wife Dorn, sons James and Michael and family. Always in our hearts and thoughts.

Of course, since it was in a discarded newspaper, protecting my desk, I had missed the actual anniversary of Bardon's death by two days: it had come to my attention on 8th May 2011.

Geoff Bardon, the school teacher and artist, was instrumental in stimulating the beginnings of the Papunya Tula art movement in 1971. As he wrote:

These Western Desert paintings seemed to me in 1971 to explicate and culturally enhance a visual writing in which word and image become one. The ideogrammatic and pictographic texts in these paintings were not understood linearly, but rather from any direction by the Western Desert peoples: they used an archetypal writing *summoned forth* from the brutal environment of the desert assimilationist camps and re-enacting the Western Desert culture in all its glory.

In 1986, I painted a work called *After Civilisation (for Geoff Bardon)*, which I am including in this exhibition. It is a painting that has only ever been exhibited twice and never reproduced. It was first shown in the United States as part of a solo exhibition at a university gallery, *Australian Appropriations: The Recent Paintings of Imants Tillers*, at Vollum College Center Gallery, Reed College, Portland, Oregon, February 1-March 8, 1987. This followed my exhibition in the Arsenale at the 42nd Venice Biennale where I was representing Australia. The second time it was shown was as part of *Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane – a landmark exhibition coordinated by Michael Eather and Marlene Hall. The painting depicts a cosy living room with a red couch and green velvet drapes, looking out onto a classical landscape complete with Greek columns and temple ruins (based on a composition by Giorgio de Chirico). However, both room and landscape seem to have been infiltrated by Aboriginal energy!

The “Aboriginal energy” is due to my quotation of Michael Nelson Jagamara's winning design for the Parliament House Mosaic (one of the masterpieces of Australian Art), reproduced ten years later on the cover of Vivien Johnson's monograph on Jagamara. Given past events and misunderstandings, Michael Eather and I sought Michael Nelson's permission to include this hitherto little-known painting of mine in the present exhibition. On the eve of his solo exhibition at FireWorks Gallery on 15th June 2012, Michael Nelson Jagamara gave his approval. As the poet Novalis once wrote: “One is exalted for having received permission to do so from a person you were obliged to ask”.

There can be no doubt that the *only* original contribution Australia has made to the history of world art in the 20th Century is Australian Indigenous Art, which begins with the Papunya Tula movement in 1971. A recent publication from Thames & Hudson, *Art: The Whole Story* (2010), edited by Stephen Farthing, bears this out most graphically, as this is indeed the only Australian entry in this comprehensive survey from 75,000 B.C. to the present. Aboriginal rock and cave paintings also feature in the earliest parts of this book – but it is the 20th century that is of particular interest. This is not to deny, of course, outstanding non-Indigenous artists from the Antipodes such as John Peter Russell, Ian Fairweather, Fred Williams, Sidney Nolan, Colin McCahon or Ian Burn, amongst others, who deserve recognition on the world stage, but who nevertheless would count as part of other art movements, originating from elsewhere – Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Conceptual Art, etc. The originality of Australian Indigenous Art therefore stands alone.

In 1985, I painted a controversial work *The Nine Shots*, which drew its imagery from both Michael Nelson Jagamara and the German neo-expressionist Georg Baselitz. The process was not that of a simple overlay of one image over another but a more complex interspersal of both sources that involved a certain struggle to find what I felt was the right fit between them. Panels were removed, repainted, reassembled, rearranged to strike the right balance. Naïve and inexperienced, however, in Aboriginal culture and its protocols, my borrowing and transformation of motifs from Michael Nelson Jagamara's stunning

work *Five Dreamings* (1984) were unauthorised. Hence the controversy. However, as Novalis writes: "Error is the indispensable instrument of truth. With error I make truth. The complete employment of error equals the complete possession of truth".

Subsequently, *The Nine Shots* has arguably become my most successful and celebrated work, in so far, it is the most reproduced – illustrated in many Australian and international publications – and it even appears as a footnote to the substantial entry (by Ian Mclean) on Michael Nelson Jagamara in *Art: The Whole Story*.

In *The Nine Shots*, the work I quoted from Baselitz was his painting *Forward Wind* (1965), which shows a man in front of a tree with outstretched arms, fixed to the tree. Crucified. In other works of Baselitz from this period, the tree is depicted alone, "assuming a human form, rooted in the ground and stretching out its branches toward the sky, bleeding from the wounds dealt by fate". In the 1980s, when I was exploring a new vocabulary of images for myself, I was particularly attracted to Baselitz's 'A New Type' series of 1965 and 1966, and I painted many paintings which included a range of these figures, in addition to the one in *The Nine Shots*.

Gunther Gercken, in a small catalogue of Baselitz's 'Hero Paintings' for an exhibition at Michael Werner, New York, in 1990, has pointed out the *distinguishing marks* of these figures:

Youthful male figure, mostly standing, but sometimes seated or squatting... of gigantic stature, stressed by his small head and large

hands, which display stigmata and hold a flag or a palette, or carry a burning house or a wheelbarrow on an outstretched palm. Barefoot. The weight of his massive body is held in suspense by a forward movement that remains frozen.

Gercken described the *attitude* of this new type as “of rapt emotion; of being overwhelmed without violence, of surrender; of suffering”, and his *gaze* as “ecstatic, prophetic, faraway, into the future”. The clothing of the new type is also noted: “Battledress, open blouse with patch pockets, wide shorts or long pants gathered at the ankles, with bandages”.

Why was I drawn to these rather dismal figures? In the 1980s they seemed to hold some kind of truth for me that I had no means of accessing at that time. I proceeded by intuition. Now I think I recognise my deceased father, also named Imants Tillers, in these figures. Certainly in his physical appearance and demeanour. I know that he was recruited to the Latvian Legion in 1943 when he was only 17 or 18, in the period when Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany, and that he was a prisoner of war of the Allies for a year in Belgium, firstly under the British and then the Americans, who set him and the other Latvians free. He met my mother in a displaced persons camp in Germany after the war, and my parents travelled in the ship *Volendam* to Australia as refugees, arriving in Sydney in 1949, the year before my birth.

Since my parents died (my father died in 2001, soon after the terrorist attacks on the United States; my

mother in 2007), I have come into possession of a small number of tattered diaries that my father kept as a soldier and as a prisoner of war. They are highly emotionally charged objects, written in pencil in a neat handwriting on poor paper – in Latvian that defies my attempts at transcription and translation. I can barely imagine his sense of desolation. The great calamity that has befallen him – hardly an adult. Not a shred of hope! Stupefied by circumstance. A victim of what is infinitely close at hand.

Nevertheless, from the diary, which contains elegant diagrams of his journey, I discover that he left Riga by ship on 19th August 1944, and was in Berlin on 18th February 1945 and Hannover on 2nd March 1945. In between, there were several journeys on foot – “the walks of failure” – and other train journeys. These journeys to nowhere seem to finish on 9th September 1945 – the places are unrecognisable (and incomprehensible) to me: Kehele, Booma, Brigge, Zedelgema. As Thomas Bernhard writes in *On the Mountain*: “Alone with our destination, with our father and with our mother”.

The chocolate box “Lindt Lindor Assorted”, in which my mother kept my father’s diaries, contains a single handwritten note in my wife Jennifer’s handwriting:

Hohn in 1947 – hamlet in Germany where Dzidra and Imants were married, near Hamlin (the region) – in May the streets were lined with apple trees in blossom – they married a year after meeting when they were housed in accommodation for displaced persons in houses belonging to people who’d fled.

In one of the diaries there is another poignant entry – two addresses: one in Chicago; the other, somewhere in Argentina. Nevertheless, my father survived the war, met my mother and came to Australia, where there was no one waiting for them. And their first-born son, of Latvian heritage, also an Imants, went on to collaborate as an artist with a full-blood Warlpiri who lived in the Western Desert. Who could have envisaged such an unlikely chain of events?

Novalis: “Friends, the ground is poor; we must strew abundant seed that we might nonetheless reap a modest harvest.”

What can I say about the collaborations with Michael Nelson Jagamara? They were conducted over vast distances. There is much terrain between the southern tablelands in New South Wales, the plateau called the Monaro into which the town of Cooma nestles, the government settlement of Papunya in Central Australia (where Michael Nelson Jagamara still lives and works, and where Albert Namatjira served his detention in 1959 just before his death) and the city of Brisbane on Queensland’s south-eastern coast – the home of Michael Eather, FireWorks Gallery and the Campfire Group. The triangle of doubt – but also of great possibilities.

From the outset, we wanted to limit the number of joint works – and there were only seven works painted between 2001 and 2008. Seven works over seven years. It is a very modest harvest! But it allowed me to investigate issues to do with chance, destiny, poetic knowledge, history, identity and Aboriginality

in other works of my own. During this period, I became fascinated with the uncanny resonance, for example, between the works of another of Australia’s great artists, Emily Kngwarreye, and the American painter Brice Marden, whose work can at other times resemble that of Ian Fairweather and even Fred Williams.

But in particular I studied the works of Emily. As Novalis has said: “only an artist can divine the sense of life. The genuine poet is all knowing – he is an actual world in miniature”. In the works of Emily, one can discern the kind of poetic knowledge that Novalis is referring to when he writes: “The consummate form of knowledge must be poetic. Each theorem must have an individual character – it must be a self-evident individuum enveloping a flash of insight”. While Emily paints rather than writes – the paintings all contain a story, or fragments of a story. Novalis: “As in Taoism... the less the artist exists as a being separate from his work, the more perfect the work. See for instance, Chuang Tsu’s tale of the woodcarver, in which the woodcarver simply allows the work to appear in its perfection”. Is this not a profound insight if applied to Emily’s paintings?

In 2005, I painted two memorials to Aboriginal Australia – *Terra Incognita*, which is on display at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra; and *Terra Negata*, which I have included in this exhibition. Both works quote extensively from one of the great works of the 20th century – Emily Kngwarreye’s *Big Yam Dreaming* (1995). They acknowledge in different ways the historical occupation of Australia by Aboriginal

peoples before colonisation, by drawing on the evidence of David Horton's map, which shows the distribution of over 460 Aboriginal tribal/language groups across the Australian continent. I intended these two works to be a refutation of the once convenient but bizarre doctrine of "terra nullius". I cannot imagine these works being painted had I not been immersed in a process of collaboration with Michael Nelson Jagamara.

Another point about the collaborations is that Michael Nelson, in a conspicuous spirit of goodwill, agreed to the works being painted on canvas board panels, being numbered and included as part of my so-called "Book of Power". Yet they are still part of his *oeuvre* as well. Michael Nelson Jagamara, whenever he has been faced with a new challenge in the artistic arena, is known "to have a go". He is not only one of the great Aboriginal artists, but certainly the most *experimental* of them all. Most recently, when I was asked by Torah Bright, the Cooma snowboarder who won gold for Australia at the last winter Olympics, to decorate her 2012 snowboard – the Roxy Bright "Eminence" Edition – I invited Michael Nelson to collaborate as well. So the final design contains a "lightning dreaming". Michael Nelson Jagamara must be the first Aboriginal artist to feature on a snowboard!

None of these collaborations with Michael Nelson Jagamara could have taken place without the involvement of Michael Eather. To him I am very grateful. His understanding of and engagement with Aboriginal people has allowed him to create a truly experimental situation in Brisbane, particularly with

the Campfire Group but now with FireWorks Gallery as well. It was his idea to suggest that Michael Nelson and I work on "a couple of collaborative paintings" when my attempt in 2001 to involve Michael Nelson Jagamara in a sculptural project at Overflow Park at the Olympic site at Homebush Bay in Sydney fell through.

During the course of seven years of intermittent engagement with Michael Nelson, I remember visiting Michael Eather's house in Brisbane for dinner on one occasion. Michael Nelson Jagamara was staying there, downstairs with another Aboriginal artist. Both were in Brisbane to work on paintings.

"What do they do when they are downstairs?" I asked. "They're watching the Nature Channel on Cable TV", replied Michael. Then I noticed a cloud of flying ants around the light above the dinner table. "Due to Michael Nelson Jagamara's presence downstairs", laughed my host. Today I understand that Flying Ant Dreaming (the subject of one of Michael Nelson's first paintings in 1979) is better explained by saying "spirit-being called Flying Ant".

Novalis: "Bringing forth the world. Every word is a word of incantation. Whatever spirit is called, such a one appears. Blossoming flame, speaking flame, changing flame".

Then there was once a remarkable phone call from Michael Nelson Jagamara from a public telephone box in Papunya to me in Cooma. I was quite taken aback! It was not about our collaborations but on another subject. That is the only telephone call I have ever received from Papunya.

On another occasion, there was an encounter with possums or perhaps a spirit-being named Possum. I was working on the fourth work in the collaborative series, *From Afar* (2002), which contained a Possum Dreaming by Michael Nelson Jagamara as an under layer. One night when we were not at home, a possum came down the narrow flue of our kitchen slow-combustion stove. It was covered in black soot and wreaked havoc through several adjoining rooms until it passed through the studio. On the floor was the unfinished painting *From Afar*, and the possum chose to walk across it, leaving its black possum prints in the bottom left-hand corner.

The work already contained the strange, unfathomable words of the Japanese/American artist Shusaku Arakawa: "The distance out of which, who, repeatedly hypostatized speaks". I was astonished by the possum prints but eventually painted over them – adding the words "confused possum" to mark their former presence.

Four years have elapsed since the seventh and final collaborative work *Fatherland* (2008) was completed. Now it is over 10 years since Michael Nelson Jagamara and I first embarked on our adventure, and early last year, Michael Eather told me that Michael Nelson was not satisfied with only seven works and was eager to do more. So the thought came to me to do a very large work that could be both a celebration of the Papunya Tula movement and also a lamentation for its twilight – since many of the original artists have become old or have already passed away. *Hymn to the Night* was chosen as a working title. It references an epic poem by Novalis:

Downwards I turn  
Towards the holy, unspeakable,  
Mysterious Night.

The idea for the painting developed over a year and was completed by Michael Nelson on 20th March this year. It is painted on 165 canvas board panels and measures approximately 3 x 5 metres. If the first seven collaborative works constitute the first chapter, *Hymn to the Night* perhaps heralds the beginning of the second – another path – and perhaps Novalis should be our guide and talisman on this second journey.

Novalis was the pen-name of the German romantic poet and visionary philosopher Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801), who before his untimely death compiled notes for an encyclopedia of universal knowledge, on topics ranging from the natural world to mystical religion.

As the translator of a recent compilation of Novalis' writings (*Fragments and Pollen*), Arthur Versluis points out, that his work is a compelling synthesis of natural philosophy and mythic imagination, "which awakens us to the reality that Nature is a spiritual poem and that human and cosmic love are ultimately one". As Novalis writes: "Since God was able to become man, he can become even stones, plants, animals and elements and perhaps there is in this way a perpetual deliverance in nature".

Before Michael Nelson touched any of the canvas board panels, I was marking out a "ghost version" of *Hymn to the Night* in Cooma on a second set of

165 panels. My text was a kind of poetic map of the Western Desert and its inhabitants – with Papunya at its heart. Also, I included words about “surrender” and “extinction”. These mainly come from the Australian playwright Janis Balodis (who is also of Latvian heritage):

We surrendered our land  
we surrendered our history  
we surrendered our culture  
we surrendered our souls  
we surrendered our language  
we surrendered our children  
we surrendered our hope  
we surrendered our lives  
we surrendered our identity  
and yet...”

He was referring to Latvians under the long years of Soviet occupation – from 1944 to 1991. Equally he might have been speaking from the point of view of all the lost Aboriginal tribes, which once occupied the entire continent of Australia.

*Hymn to the Night* marks a change in the methodology of our collaborative process. In this work, I surrender to Michael Nelson Jagamara. He both started and finished this work. My layer (a background of colours that “speak”) is sandwiched between his beginning and his end. Michael Nelson understands the intention of this work – its content of mourning for the passing generations – the brilliant but fleeting moment of Papunya Tula. However, why not see these inevitable changes as the catalyst for the dawn of a new kind of art in the 21st Century, one

that might be called “post-Aboriginal”. A unique synthesis of the old and the new – the Aboriginal and the contemporary. And who else to lead the way but someone like Michael Nelson Jagamara? One of the original artists in the second wave of the movement in the 1970s and perhaps the individual who is most receptive to contemporary modes of art – certainly one of the most experimental among Aboriginal artists!

The fact of our collaboration in an ongoing series of canvas board works since 2001 is remarkable, and it is indeed a great privilege for me to continue to be a part of it. For us, “the miracle” is not over yet.

I have been recognised as an artist for 40 years now. And as I reflect on the passing years, I see each decade being characterised by a unique emphasis or theme. I would suggest that they trace the following trajectory or sequence: post-object; postmodern; post-Soviet (or postcolonial); post-Aboriginal. I describe the way, and meanwhile, perhaps, I am proceeding along it.

Imants Tillers  
25th June 2012  
‘Blairgowrie’, Cooma