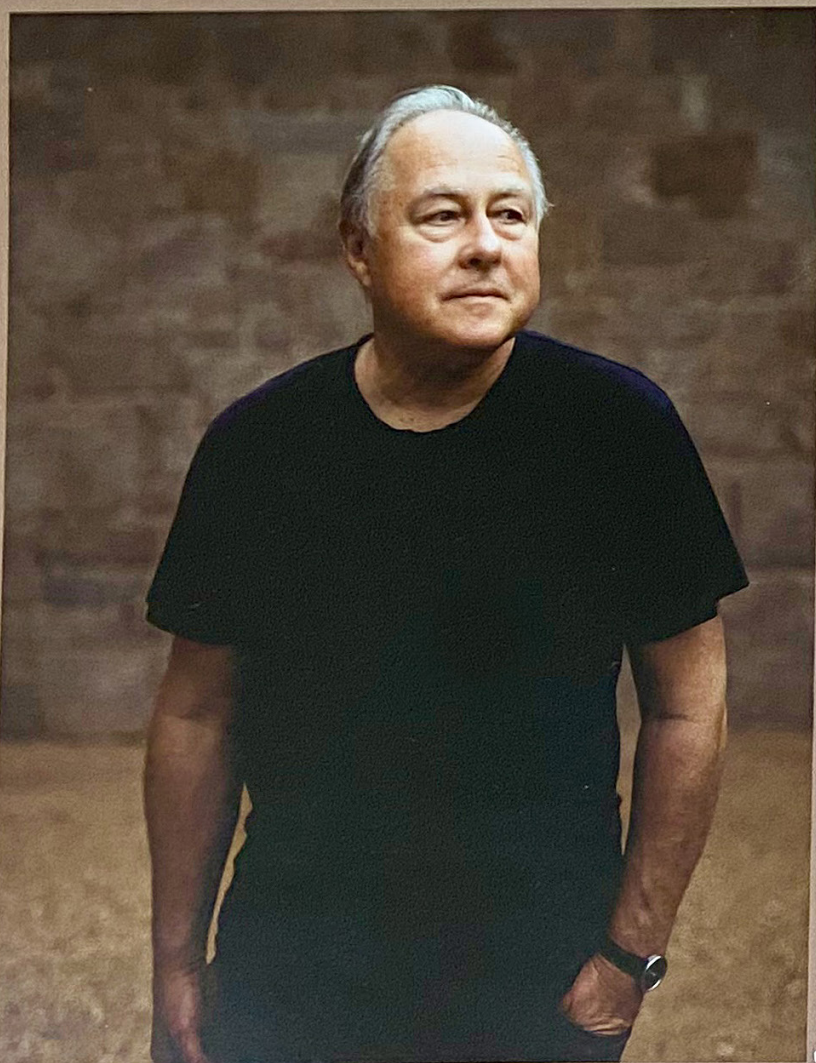

BOOK

A throw of the dice

As a collection of Imants Tillers's essays over forty years *Credo* is more than the sum of its parts, offering reflection on many discussions in contemporary art in Australia from the 1980s onwards, from the perspective of one of its more controversial artists.

BOOK REVIEW BROOKE BOLAND



While known for his large arrangements of canvasboards, famed contemporary artist Imants Tillers also writes. About art and artists. About making contemporary art in Australia. About his relationship to his Latvian heritage. On one occasion, he writes of his repeated attempts to paint a portrait of Murray Bail (first published in *Heat*, 1998). "This work no longer exists," he states in the latter, referring to attempted Murray Bail portrait number four: "I removed twelve canvasboard panels featuring Murray and moved them to another painting" – a process that is typical of Tillers's work.

This recycling, mosaic-like, pieced together nature of Tillers's practice is similar to the pieced together feeling of his new collection of essays, *Credo*, 2023, published by Giramondo Publishing. "Everything in the world exists to end up in a book," he quotes the French poet Mallarmé in his essay "Journey to Nowhere," 2018. Tillers's various essays and contributions to journals including *Art & text*, *Art and Australia*, and *Heat*, among others, are no exception. I'd contextualise this collection not as one single ideology or philosophy as the title

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implies, but as several intersecting viewpoints on art-making at a specific time in Australian art history. It's also a collection that reveals what changes and what stays the same over forty years of Tillers's career as an artist.

The expanse of his career is clearest in the more recent essay "Journey to Nowhere," 2018. Tillers writes: "I confess that when I started to work on canvasboard panels in 1981, I also began to count the panels consecutively with a view to continue indefinitely. What a preposterous idea! And yet thirty-six years later I have exceeded 100,000." He counts these panels as well as other works in his *Book of Power* which documents all of his work from the eighties onwards. "The *Book of Power* is a cruel master," he writes. These are the small insights into Tillers's work that can be gleaned from *Credo*.

Famously known for his appropriation of Warlpiri artist Michael Nelson Jagamara's *Five Stories*, 1985 without following any cultural safety protocols, Tillers became an example of what not to do. Over thirty years have passed, and the conversation has moved on: Aboriginal art isn't being contextualised with only the past or as exoticism. Contemporary artists aren't looking towards a European centre as the definition of our cultural values. When I speak to artists, their influences number in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, just as often if not more than European counterparts – because time and space have collapsed in unanticipated ways and the tyranny of distance is changed (COVID-19 aside). Also, we have experienced the eighties and nineties, a period that stands out in many ways for its postcolonial and feminist interrogations with its attention to cultural mimicry and dismantling of conventions of culture and patriarchy.

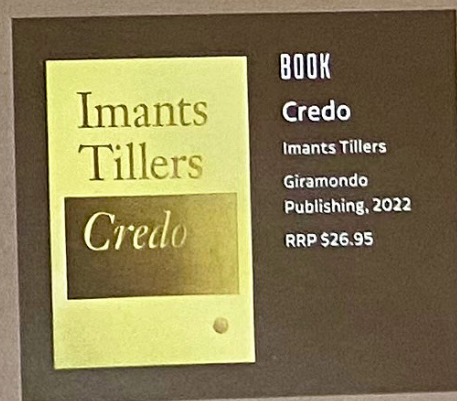
Or am I stuck in the provincial bind from which there is no escape merely by validating that Australian artists are "making good original art right here," as Tillers writes? He gives us more insight into his understanding of this bind in his essay "Perturbations in the Image Field," which discusses the dialectic of centre and periphery and introduces chaos theory as a way to describe the impact marginal and peripheral artists (such as those working in Australia) have on former centres of cultural value.

While Tillers's artworks offer an examination of originality and authorship, often through citation, as a collection his essays speak more strongly of an ongoing interest in location and identity that deepens across his career. "Naturally, issues of locality and identity have become uppermost in my mind," he writes in "Locality Prevails," which suggests the influence his move from Sydney to the regional town of Cooma had on his work. Seeing the title "Locality Prevails," I thought here would be a continuation of Tillers's controversial 1982 essay "Locality Fails." Prevailing as a kind of triumph offering more insight (perhaps changes) to his earlier opinions, where he positioned Aboriginality as a kind of aesthetic or lifestyle being adapted by non-Aboriginal contemporary artists and identified an inauthentic engagement with Aboriginal culture resulting from underlying guilt. But the separation of contemporary and Aboriginal art evident in the essay and symptomatic of the debate remains deeply problematic. Could locality prevail thirty-six years on? Yes and no.

He writes of his later collaborations with Jagamara, and asserts his desire to connect with Aboriginal art which he sees as "still the most powerful discourse within Australian art." But Tillers stops just short of true engagement with his earlier

ideas, leaving untied threads that suggest a change but don't delve as deeply into his credo as his 1982 essay. That's not necessarily a criticism, but I wanted to read more about what he thought now.

But we get a little insight into this evolution of Tillers's ideas on place and engagement with country. "Locality Prevails" ends with a quote by Philipp Otto Runge: "There are times when it seems to me as if the world was splitting up into its individual elements, and as if the land, water, flowers, clouds, the moon and rocks were all conversing with one another. They all seem to be alive, and I start to feel half crazy; but I am patient and when I can get outside again, I understand everything better." The context is Tillers's garden in Cooma, which is "an old European-style garden of hundred-year-old pines, cedars and deciduous trees" where he experiences the four seasons as a "European rhythm significantly different from that of the Australian landscape, yet still somehow within it." In other words, Tillers has gone to regional New South Wales and found himself in Europe. A displacement of interest to him as he worked on his *Nature Speaks* series that documents the Cooma-Monaro region at the time. ■



01 Imants Tillers photographed by Corinna and Dylan, 2018, courtesy of Giramondo Publishing