

DOUBLE NATION

A History of Australian Art



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REAKTION BOOKS



1 George Stubbs, *The Kongouro from New Holland*, 1772, oil on panel.

as a mentor, gave Burn a conceptual grounding for his Conceptual Art. It makes his New York conceptual Art & Language phase upon which his reputation rests seem an interim phase in his ongoing wrestling with how to paint the Australian landscape. Ann Stephen pinpointed the decisive moment of Burn's re-entry into the idea of Australian art to his brief visit to Melbourne in late 1972.²⁷ Being back in Australia after eight years as an expatriate drew Burn to the old chestnut of provincialism. It would pervade his future thinking. In 1973 he published an essay on the topic, and the next year Terry Smith, who in 1972 had also joined Art & Language in New York, published his more influential 'The Provincialism Problem'.²⁸

Overcoming the problem of provincialism would be central to each in their reassessments of Australian art.²⁹ While they proceeded differently, each found part of his answer in the necessary Indigenization of Australian art. They were not the only ones to owe this revelation to a conceptualist epistemology. The former Inhibodress trio of Parr, Kennedy and Johnson each engaged with Indigenous Australia in different ways in the decade after 1975: Parr in a documented performance at a major rock art site *Identification No 1 (Rib Markings in the Carnarvon Ranges nw Qld)* (1975); Johnson through a prolonged engagement with Central Australian Aboriginal painters in the 1980s; and Kennedy with John Hughes (b. 1948) in *On Sacred Land* (1983–6). Each of these works was a type of conceptual or post-landscape art. From this point increasing numbers of urban-based artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, looked to Aboriginal Australia for inspiration.

The most notable example, because he most cogently reimagined Australian art in explicit post-national terms, is Imants Tillers (b. 1950). A graduate of the Tin Sheds, Tillers committed to conceptualism in 1969 after working as a volunteer on Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast*. Rapidly picked up early in his career, he became the pre-eminent international Australian artist of his generation. Today, honoured in Australian and a newly conceived post-Soviet-era history of Latvian national art, he and his art embody the post-national condition.

In the midst of the Cold War Tillers had already fitted his art to the post-national idea by gearing it to the accidental mutations produced in the chance distortions and juxtapositions that occur with media-based images in their global proliferation. In 1975 Donald Brook speculated that Tillers's thinking had the 'capacity' to push

through the current aesthetic confusion (of *Anything Goes*) and 'revise an entire aesthetic epistemology'.³⁰ Tillers had just completed his breakthrough installation *Conversations with the Bride* (1974–5). Responding to Terry Smith's essay 'The Provincialism Problem', its elaborate immersive field of appropriated images and reflections unchained the provincialism problem by putting the New York cosmopolitan Marcel Duchamp and the Hahndorf rustic Hans Heysen into conversation on equal footings. Tillers's appropriation method became the model for his ongoing magnum opus, the 'Book of Power'. Casting a wide net over the whole history of Australian and international contemporary art, including Aboriginal Australian art, it is an unparalleled multivalent discourse of images and texts, which he has been transcribing onto canvas boards since 1981.³¹

An appropriate page from the 'Book of Power' with which to draw *Double Nation* towards a close is *Kangaroo Blank* (1988) (illus. 172), which Thomas commissioned for 'The Great Australian Art Exhibition, 1788–1988'. Now in the Tate collection, *Kangaroo Blank* appropriates George Stubbs's *The Kongouro from New Holland* (see illus. 1), discussed in the Introduction. In removing the kangaroo from the foreground, Tillers transformed it into a landscape painting, effectively declaring it the first Australian landscape oil painting, a genre in which, from this point, he became increasingly interested. He also substituted the kangaroo with a mysterious otherworldly column emitting golden rays; an appropriation of the Japanese/American Conceptual artist Arakawa's iconic diagram of the imagination associated with his concept of 'blank'. Whatever orders 'the coordination of the senses', proposed Arakawa, remains 'blank to us'.³² *Kangaroo Blank* is a pun on the origin moment of painting and also on the imagining of Australia – Cook having imagined the continent as blank, *terra nullius*.

By 1988 the idea of Australian art was moving towards a new sense of itself. A first wave of urban-based Indigenous artists were graduating from Australian art schools with a Western art curriculum under their belt, thereby confounding the racism inherited from White Australia (see *Rattling Spears*). This is a story for another book, and one in which the reverberations of Tillers's post-national 'aesthetic epistemology' are strongly felt, most notably in the art of Gordon Bennett (see illus. 5). Bringing a political focus to Tillers's appropriation method, Bennett's art considerably sharpened the critical edge of post-national histories. In his wake, a whole art movement and discourse developed in this



172 Imants Tillers, *Kangaroo Blank*, 1988, oil stick, gouache, oil paint and synthetic polymer paint on 78 canvas boards.

deconstructive vein to unpack the historical origins of the national idea. Bennett's legacy continues, a recent example at the time of writing being the exhibition of 2021, 'Through a Lens of Visitation', featuring the post-conceptual art of D. Harding (b. 1982), with the textile art of their mother Kate Harding.

Acknowledging Bennett's interest in Preston's appropriations of Aboriginal Australian art, the exhibition took its immediate departure from visits by Preston, Nolan and Parr to Harding's ancestral country in the Carnarvon Ranges of Central Queensland.³³ Drawn to echoes of post-war 'minimal, conceptual and reductive art practices' – Yves Klein is a touchstone – in the rock art of the Carnarvon Gorge, Harding claims an ancestral relationship with both legacies. They describe their practice as a 'quest towards establishing a national art' recreated from this double ancestry. 'What might happen', Harding asks, 'if more of Central Queensland's Murri [Aboriginal] community see themselves within the histories of Australian art rather than through the lenses of people who came, saw and left again?'³⁴ This, not the problem of provincialism, is the key question being asked today of Australian art.

Every question has its blind spots, including those asked in *Double Nation*. Like nearly all histories of Australia's art, its survey obscures non-European settlers, the first of whom arrived with the First Fleet as convicts. This obscuring is one effect of the politics of *terra nullius* and race that framed the idea of Australia. Between the dichotomy of Settler and Aboriginal Australia, which preoccupies the national polity and Australian art more than ever, is the blur of Asian, African, American and Pacific Australians. This ever-doubling hall of mirrors is generating complex but obscure relations down and across each side of the founding cleavage of this settler-nation. 'Being black and African and Australian and an artist is a complicated space to live in,' wrote Brian Obiri-Asare in 2022. 'It's like being caught in a rip between competing worlds.'³⁵