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# IMANTS TILLERS

*This month Australian Accent, an exhibition of work by three contemporary Australian artists, begins an Australian tour, following a very successful tour of the United States. Elizabeth Parsons spoke to one of the artists, Imants Tillers.*

Settlement At Papunya 1983



Photographed by Fern Himchcliffe

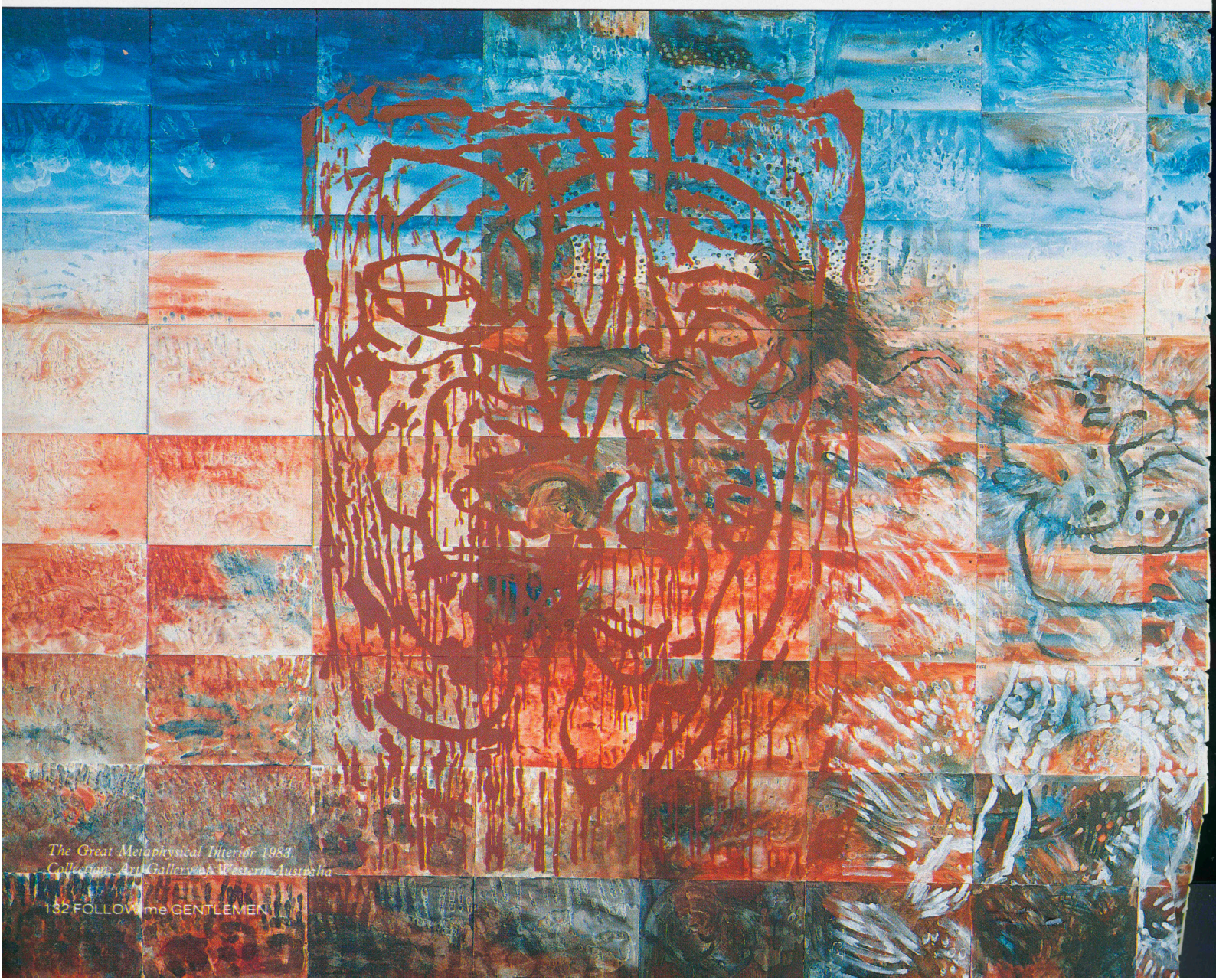
Australians appreciate the art of the twice removed. Picasso's *Guernica* is an eight by ten inch reproduction in *The Shock of the New*, and Van Gogh's flower vases adorn the walls of every student house in the country. We pore over mass produced art—from ABC documentaries to coffee table discount books. For Imants Tillers, displaced person cum Tall Poppy of the Sydney Art Scene, this is the soul of the Australian culture cringe;

"a culture of counterfeit images". Trained in architecture at the University of Sydney from 1969 to 1972, Tillers moved to the Fine Art Workshop, *The Tin Sheds*, as an undergraduate and has been travelling and professionally exhibiting ever since. Tillers counterfeits, copies, quotes and 'appropriates' from experience. From the Latvian storybook characters of his youth to catalogue entries in art journals, the

theoretical basis is simple; he utilizes the geographic inconvenience of artistic life in Sydney as the starting point for all his work. "I work mainly from reproductions. I used to use obscure imagery, but now it's recognizable. Photographs from magazines, images that people can recognize easily. But it's not planned. I work on intuition. Not that you actually copy, really you empathize. I try to arrive at the same image, but it's not



Little



The Great Metaphysical Interior 1983  
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia

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imitation". Empathy aside, Imants says his mother worries about "the way I use other people's images. She thinks it's immoral. But I see it more as invisibility, rather than mimicry—my persona becomes invisible." I like his work—the mimicry, the magnitude and sometimes, just occasionally, the rhetoric. I've spent a weekend studying pages of rhetoric in popular art journals, like *Art & Text*, *Double Trouble* and *Tension*. Imants fills pages of copy. "Writing things helps me clarify ideas. It's supplementary to the painting". Apparently his works don't have to say things, as the delineation between image and written idea means that the paintings can be "simply looked at". In a recent *Tension* interview for example, Imants comments: "with every new visual language there has to be a different form in written language to go with it". Quite simply, Tillers enjoys writing the articles. Through his intellectual ramblings he stumbles across new ideas, and contrary ideas which open up new territory. It's an intellectual basis for his work.

Tillers works on the sort of art shop boards you see people carrying to and from adult education classes. They're about 25cm by 35cm, primed, and ready for a still life with fruit at any hour of the day. He takes five or six dozen blank boards; charcoals, paints,

pencils and numbers them, and finally fits them together on a wall, in a gallery. The edges of each board create a structural grid (the massive works often covering up to about six square metres) and the final product appears mosaic in nature. After seeing art students struggling to stretch and tack large canvasses onto frames, and then transport them to school like Keystone Cop glazier companies, I can think of hundreds of reasons why.

Tillers says he's interested in "the way the panels are made and the way they stack,

"Artists here have suffered from a form of anorexia, or low self-esteem. It's somehow incorporated in the work we're doing now, but it's a positive quality. For instance, I can't imagine working on giant, stretched canvases. But working on amateur boards; that makes me feel a little less heroic."

and the fact that they don't exist once they're taken off the wall. It's precarious—the image goes in and out of existence." Besides the volatility of the method, studio space

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*"Tillers' art is most effective when it refutes its own detached, intellectual approach; that is, when it is lush and sensuous, as pleasing to look at as it is to think about."*

*Robert Atkins, Newsday.*

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*"Did masochistic endurance-art acts lead to macho tantrums of paint elsewhere, or only in Australia?"*

*Kim Levin, Village Voice.*



Andrew Southam



provides another motive. Tillers abhors the idea of a 'working environment'. He creates in a small room in his Mosman flat. "I like working in a space that's not made for art work. I don't like the idea of working in a studio, but the walls in my room aren't big enough for the size of my stuff.

So I don't see the works (in toto) until they're up on a gallery wall." The 'decomposed' works also freight easily; works can be transported from Sydney to New York or London in suitcases—a definite advantage when you're an aspiring Australian artist. "I've always worked with small units,

dismountable units. In a way it's related back to that idea of geographical isolation."

The panel structure also reaffirms Tillers' obsession with the notion of Australian cultural inferiority. "Artists here have suffered from a form of anorexia, or low self-esteem.

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Tillers feels that that we are protected from

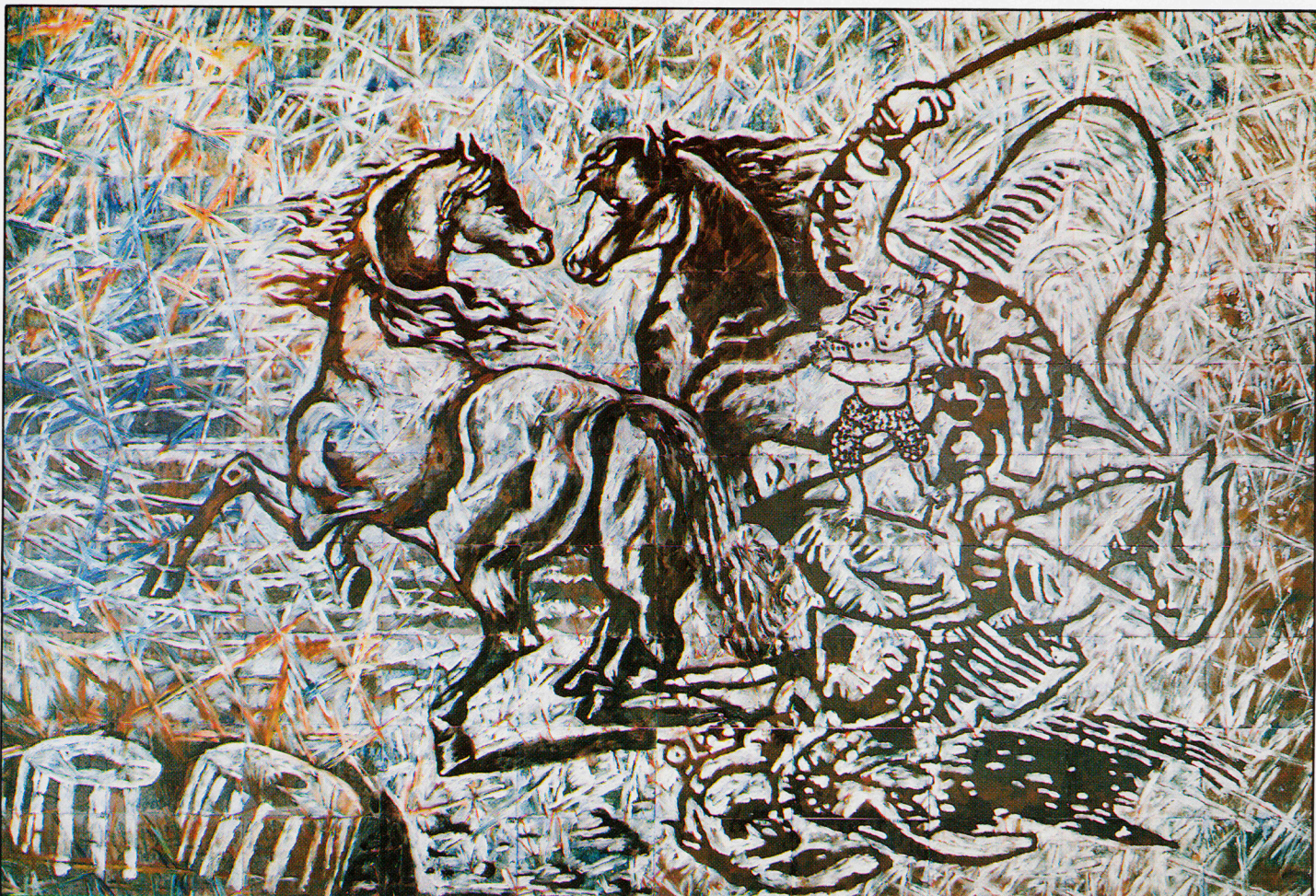
the aura and authority of original art works. "We're just not used to confronting internationally acclaimed art . . . (hence the *Blue Poles* saga) . . . I don't know exactly what effect that has on us precisely. It's probably a sense of unreality". We rely on mechanical reproduction, the 'dot-screen' image—and on this basis, Tillers sees himself moving from one image to another in a nomadic fashion. The metaphor 'white aborigine' has been coined to this effect. What sort of people does a white Latvian aborigine hang around with, anyway?

Imants actually studied architecture, and graduated with the University of Sydney Medal. "I don't think I was ever suited to the discipline involved. I feel that I've reacted against my architectural training. A lot of my friends from school run successful practices now . . . I just don't feel pressured to act in that way. Having given the profession away, I feel that's a strong reason to push my art."

The John Kaldor *Art Project 7* exhibition that appeared in New York this year is scheduled for a Sydney opening in December. Mike Parr, Ken Unsworth, and Imants Tillers are represented. "It's the best exhibition I've ever been involved with: the way it was put together, the timing—breaking us into the New York art scene."

For Australian viewers, Tillers sees *Art Project 7* as potentially changing the way people think of our art. "It's not a traditional Australian art show — it's a new way of approaching the area. No Ned Kellys, and landscapes don't dominate. While it's important to recognize regional differences in art movements, we don't have to limit ourselves to such obvious aspects of our culture."

Brush the Nolans aside. See Imants Tillers.



Das Napoleonspiel 1983  
Private Collection: John Buckley Melbourne

