

ANTIPODEAN MANIFESTO

When Giorgio de Chirico died in 1978, the Japanese-American artist Arakawa (whose work had been one of my major preoccupations during the 1970's) wrote a brief, somewhat enigmatic tribute to him. A friend, the author Murray Bail, generously passed it on to me and sometime later it became a life-changing moment for me when I read and absorbed it.

Arakawa's piece was entitled *Towards Francis Picabia*, written in New York City on the 3rd December 1978. It begins:

"Just as Stephane Mallarmé was once maligned I am afraid that this too might be happening in our time to Giorgio de Chirico. Now as then this is ultimately not important at all. Despite foolish murmurings about such trivial matters as time, place and style within an enormous body of work, the artist pursues his intention. After the great metaphysical discoveries, an even more magnificent one of a personal order, that is, what to do with these discoveries."

Not long after, I came across the book de Chirico with an introduction by Isabella Far, published by Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1968, in a second-hand bookshop (which no longer exists) in George Street, Haymarket, Sydney. This must have been sometime in the early 1980's at coincidentally, the same time that I first became aware of the Papunya Tula art movement. Both bodies of work attracted me and I began to use imagery from both, mostly separately but in the mid 1980's they meet in a handful of works – most significantly in my painting *Antipodean Manifesto*, 1986.

This painting takes de Chirico's work *Dead Sun in a Metaphysical Interior*, 1971 as its starting point. Elsewhere I've seen this work titled (strangely) *Metaphysical interior with Sun Turned Off*. At the time I paid no heed to the title nor the date but chose the image because I liked it and simply substituted a powerful, symmetrical Papunya Tula motif for the black sun – the black void or abyss at the centre of de Chirico's image. This motif was based on Paddy Carrol Tjungurrayi's *Witchetty Grub Ceremonies*, 1983 that I'd come upon in a calendar! They seemed to fit perfectly together. Incidentally, I met Paddy Carrol later by chance in 2002 when I began to collaborate with another Warlpiri artist, Michael Nelson Jagamara at the Campfire Studios associated with Mike Eather's Fireworks Gallery in Brisbane. But now the date of my source seems a bit uncanny, for when de Chirico painted *Dead Sun in a Metaphysical Interior* in 1971 it was the exact same moment that heralded the beginning of the Papunya Tula movement in the Western Desert. I'd selected this image in 1986 (not because of the significance of the date) but perhaps because it had some weird resonance with Aboriginal art.

In Venice earlier this year thinking about this exhibition, I had what my daughter Isidore described as 'a breakfast epiphany'. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps all Aboriginal art including Papunya Tula is metaphysical (a term I had never seen used in relation to Aboriginal art before) and that this is the real connection to the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. I was then reminded of Artaud's realisation that "the crucial thing is that we know that behind the order of this world there is another".

A second work in this exhibition – Untitled (The Remorse of Orestes) 1987 – combines de Chirico's original Remorse of Orestes 1969 with dotted elements extracted from a very early Papunya Tula painting Water Dreaming, 1972, by Old Walter Tjampitjinpa. My repetition of de Chirico's painting approximates the tiny dimensions of the original. The critic Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco points out that here Orestes, whose appearance recalls one of de Chirico's mannequins, is shown in a typical Ferrara room framed by volutes that occur in de Chirico's illustrations, for Apollinaire's Calligrammes 1930. I produced a series of works titled A life of Blank, 1990, based on some of these calligrammes, which are also represented in this exhibition. Attached to Orestes is a strange serrated shadow signifying remorse. As dell'Arco points out, shadows in metaphysical pictures are generally associated with the end of the day, with disquietude and mystery but here the shadow contains another truth. It also suggests an encounter with 'the other' - perhaps a metaphysical Aborigine!

De Chirico once wrote:

"There is nothing more mysterious in all the centuries of history than the shadow of a walking man."

Mysterious, naturally, for those who know how to meditate and interpret in a melancholy vein the hermetic signs of the true Metaphysician. Perhaps the truth revealed in this exhibition is the recognition that Aboriginal artists, but especially Papunya Tula artists, are also The Great Metaphysicians of their own country, Australia, on the other side of the globe.

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