



Imants Tillers's *The Island of the Dead* ... Venice representative last year.

# A pavilion of our own — in Venice

**ART**

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**T**HE Venice Biennale is the world's major showcase for contemporary art. Every two years an international horde of artists, gallery directors, curators, critics and enthusiasts descend on Venice, all eager to see what the latest styles are, all hungry for new sensations.

Venice made many artists into overnight stars and consolidated the reputations of many others, including Henry Moore and Wilhelm De Kooning.

As opposed to other major art surveys such as the Kassel Documenta, each country which participates in Venice gets to select its own representatives. Last year, the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council invited proposals from the community as to what sort of show to send. They finally settled on a survey exhibition by one artist, Sydney's Imants Tillers.

Tillers's Venice exhibition has already been to Brisbane, and is now on display at the newly extended Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, where I saw it last week. Unfortunately the show won't be coming to Sydney. As the VAB explain it, many of the works have been seen in Sydney before, and there are dim murmurings that Tillers may be due for a local survey show in the not-too-distant future.

Tillers paints large scale copies of other artworks onto a mosaic of small canvas boards, combining imagery from many different sources, so that one part of the work illuminates or interrogates another. He has exhibited extensively overseas, and received a number of offers after Venice. His work is in line with an international vogue for "appropriation art", though it is always thought-provoking.

Nevertheless, with an expenditure in the vicinity of \$100,000, many feel that Tillers was a controversial choice. Couldn't the money have been better spent sending two or more artists? Did Tillers's work necessarily give a distorted picture of what Australian art was all about?

The VAB defend their choice by pointing out that

most of the major exhibiting nations in 1986 showed the work of one well-established artist in depth.

Most of the exhibiting nations have their own pavilions in the Giardini area. In such a large exhibition if you don't have a pavilion you run the risk of being passed over in the rush, or of being always considered a newcomer.

Australia is certainly not new to Venice, having shown there eight times since 1954. Participating in Venice is one of the best ways for Australian artists to overcome our geographical isolation.

Imants Tillers's work was well situated last year, but in 1982, when Australia was represented by Peter Booth and Rosalie Gascoigne, the accommodation sprang a leak and one of Booth's paintings was water damaged. The VAB had to pay compensation, so in 1984, when the same kind of space was available, Australia declined to exhibit.

Everyone from Japan to Iceland has a pavilion, and there is only one remaining site in the Giardini area. This site has been offered to Australia and it would be a shame if we did not take up the option. The VAB have pledged \$150,000 to the project and the Australia Council will match that. The rest of the money will have to come from the private sector.

As yet the pavilion remains a grand ambition. The money has to be gathered and an architect engaged, the building will have to be prefabricated and shipped to Venice. Naturally the pavilion is as much on display as the art and if possible should reflect something distinctively Australian.

Perhaps the best comparison with Venice is the annual film festival at Cannes. If Australian films have begun to enjoy some commercial and critical success overseas, it has a lot to do with the way those films have been promoted at Cannes.

A criticism of the VAB's determination to erect a pavilion in Venice, is that it's merely a matter of a colonial state pandering to a European cultural elite. Yet the international importance of the Venice Biennale can't be so easily dismissed, and until Australia has a pavilion in place, we are always likely to be passed off as a backward and provincial centre. Instead of a symptom of our readiness to conform to standards set elsewhere, a pavilion could more profitably be seen as a sign of growing cultural maturity.