

APPROP ... : A MANNER PROPER TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES

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Appropriately for a book by a visual artist/writer, Imants Tillers's *Credo* is beautifully designed (by Jenny Grigg): it looks small, spare, neat; has a sense of breathing space from the wide margins on the pages, the modernity of the Tiempos Regular font and the brevity of the essays; and its cover is a pale cultured-butter colour with embossed gold (reminiscent perhaps of Eastern European Christian art iconography) for title, publisher's logo and author's name.

Thence it was a shock to be struck with the acerbity of the first essay. It's not that Tillers is a provocateur, even though the context of writing in Australia about Australia (with its non-Indigenous population living on unceded land, its waves of international migration and its fretful relationship with internationalism) would readily make him a provocateur. However, the tone and texture of the writing is cerebral rather than sensuous, minimalist rather than baroque.

Nevertheless, potential provocations include the following: simulation (apropos of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings) is 'the quintessential quality of Australian life and culture', as in Australia 'the experience of works of art through mechanical reproduction always precedes their direct experience'; 'There can be no doubt that the *only* original contribution Australia

has made to the history of world art in the twentieth century is Australian Indigenous art ... This is not to deny, of course, outstanding non-Indigenous artists from the Antipodes such as John Peter Russell, Ian Fairweather, Fred Williams, Sidney Nolan, Colin McCahon or Ian Burn, amongst others ...'

Tillers is at home with internationalism and indigeneity, perhaps deriving from his European roots in Latvia which, invaded by the Soviet Union, has a historically oral-based culture of secrets, song-making and lore, and from his seemingly beloved Bell's theorem that states: 'there can be unexplained connectedness between events' vastly separated in space. Of the latter, here is one example where Tillers sees 'some weird resonance': 'when de Chirico painted *Dead Sun in a Metaphysical Interior* in 1971 it was the exact same moment that the Papunya Tula movement began in the Western Desert.'

Tillers's 14 essays are placed from earliest to recent, previously published as occasional and context-specific pieces, with the last ('The Sources') further fragmented with subtitled subsections, being commissioned by Giramondo's publisher Ivor Indyk for the collection. While Tillers notes in his preface-as-overture that there is 'no overarching theme, no grand narrative' in these collected



Opposite:
Imants Tillers, 2018; courtesy Giramondo Publishing, Warrang/Sydney; photo: Corinna & Dylan

Courtesy Giramondo Publishing, Warrang/Sydney

fragments, the dissection of Australian painting, and more broadly Australian culture, and the discussion of his own work process (quoting, repeating, masking) capture a reader in a to-and-fro journey between interconnections which are most often repetitions, but which are more than that latter word implies – that is, the repetition expands on the thing or it has the thing reviewed in a different context, much like his (re)use of his own canvas-board paintings. Repetitions include references to Latvia, Australian Indigenous paintings and painters, international artists such as Joseph Beuys, De Chirico and McCahon, the Australian writer Murray Bail, and more.

'Repetitions are worth studying,' wrote Bail in his *Notebooks* (2005). My interest in reading *Credo*, I believe, was triggered by Tillers's association with Bail who is also a subject of interest for me, in scholarly and creative writing; who is an intra- and inter-textualist (other words for quoting, appropriating and repeating) and a masker (he inserts secret jokes into his fiction); who has written on visual artists (Fairweather and McCahon); who was a trustee and council member of the National Gallery of Australia; who gifted a Beuys work to that gallery (a brother gifted a Fairweather); and whose portrait was painted by Williams. Of Tillers's 'Five portraits of Murray Bail' (a 1998 essay in *HEAT* magazine, documenting the artist's portraits of the writer), one is based on a Fairweather painting and another on a De Chirico of whom Bail is also a fan. Tillers is also a

fan of Shūsaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, the latter a correspondent of Bail's.

The tone of Tillers's essays – sharp, dry, 'flat' but, okay, provocative – comes from a depth of concentrated thinking that produces a conceptual thickness in the text, which nevertheless has this sense of 'flatness', something held under pressure, like the numerous canvas boards that compose his paintings. The canvas boards make Tillers also an intratextualist, (re)using his own works, and link him to a painter like Fairweather who used 'humble' materials as his 'canvases'.

Appropriately, again, flatness is the quality of 'traditional' Australian Indigenous paintings, echoing Australia's ancient interior landscapes.

I am exceedingly envious of those like Tillers, dually skilled in visual art and writing. While I was teaching creative writing full-time as a tenured academic in a university that also taught visual art, I read the statements of art students and often thought they were better writers than my students.

A final observation: *Credo's* hybridity and experimentation remind me of another Giramondo author, the late Beverley Farmer, who discussed or quoted Matisse, Munch and other artists in a similarly referentially entangled way in prose/poetic works.

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