

ARTS

The internationally acclaimed young artist Imants Tillers, whose work represented Australia at this year's prestigious Venice Biennale, has been chosen to decorate the important new Federation Pavilion monument in Sydney's Centennial Park — even though he calls us "an Island of the Dead". PETER WARD reports on the man and his art

The colour Tillers

For those who take their jingoism seriously, consider this: the artist who is to paint the commemorative mural in the new Federation Pavilion in Centennial Park, Sydney, believes Australia is "an Island of the Dead".

"The recent and brutal history of Australia is strewn with many corpses," he says, alluding to "the near genocide" of the Aborigines last century. "This social history is, of course, a metaphor for our cultural present," he adds.

And not only that, he also believes the place is so "deeply etched" with "the patterns of provincialism" that "Australia is the dumping ground for the rubbish of all the earth."

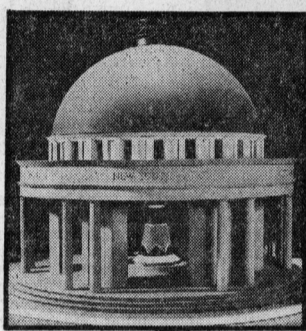
These and other less than flattering judgments and speculation on this wide brown land from an essay by Imants Tillers in the catalogue of his exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Tillers is Australian in Venice this year. Six of his large, difficult paintings have been assembled in the *Corderie dell'Arsenale* in an exhibition sponsored by the Art Gallery of South Australia with funds from the Visual Arts Board.

And according to the director of the Adelaide Gallery, Daniel Thomas, they've made quite a hit "among the people who matter."

It's not the first time Tillers has made waves. Now aged 36, he studied architecture at Sydney University and had his first exhibition of conceptual art in 1973, his graduation year. In 1975 he exhibited at the *Bienal de Sao Paulo*, in 1982 at *Documenta 7* in Kassel, and since then he has had seven showings in North America and one in West Germany.

But interest and indeed acclaim by those interested in new and testing art does not necessarily fit an artist for an Australian bicentennial project



The Federation Pavilion: as Tillers' first public commission it will be a test of his art's public accessibility

of some symbolic magnitude such as the Federation Pavilion. In fact, given Tillers' apparent doubts as to the quality of Australian culture and perhaps society, he does, on paper at least, seem an unlikely candidate for the job of expressively completing an emotionally charged national monument.

Certainly, as his next major project and his first public commission, it will be a major test of his art's public accessibility as well as his conceptual agility.

The Federation Pavilion has been designed by a talented young Sydney architect, Alexander Tzannes, and with its attendant landscaping will cost \$1.3 million, or the 1973 price of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*. It will stand above the site on which on January 1, 1901, the Australian Federation was inaugurated and over the hexagonal granite Commonwealth Stone which still marks the spot.

For the 1901 ceremony the Stone stood beneath a white, highly deco-

rated pavilion of plaster and stucco which had clustered classical columns and garlanded ornamentations in what has been called a "colonial Empire style."

Tzannes' pavilion obliquely refers to this temporary predecessor and at first was a heavy columned rotunda which critics immediately dubbed "the temple of doom." His developed proposal is now a much lighter, airier and sophisticated columned building of concrete and sandstone facing with a light copper clad dome.

What the artist and the architect are currently proposing for this building is an inscription and mural that begs a question. And it may be that the improbable choice of Imants Tillers is an inspired one.

The mural will be composed of 1620 panels of 20 different shapes which will be clipped on and cover the entire surface of the dome's interior. The basic image will have "an Aboriginal element and a European element," says Tillers.

The European element will be "appropriated" from the work of the contemporary German artist, Georg Baselitz, specifically from a reproduction of a painting by him called *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* which comes from his "A New Type of Man" series. This presents a number of proletarian or rustic figures of heroic proportions and the chosen figure for the pavilion can be read as heroic pioneer, valiant rural worker, explorer, immigrant or even convict.

The other major design element in the mural will be patterning derived from Central Australian Aboriginal art and this will extend across the whole surface of the dome, which will be ringed at the base and oculus by colored spectra lines in Venetian glass mosaic.

Initially the mural was to have been painted by Tillers using the High Renaissance Italian mural technique, fresco, in which natural pigments are applied to a wet, fresh lime plaster. The idea has now been discarded on the grounds of the doubtful durability of the medium in Sydney's humid summers and winters and the mural will now be assembled from 1620 panels of vitreous enamel allowing a much more lustrous range of colours and effects. "I want it to be dazzling but I don't want the imagery to be overpowering," Tillers says.

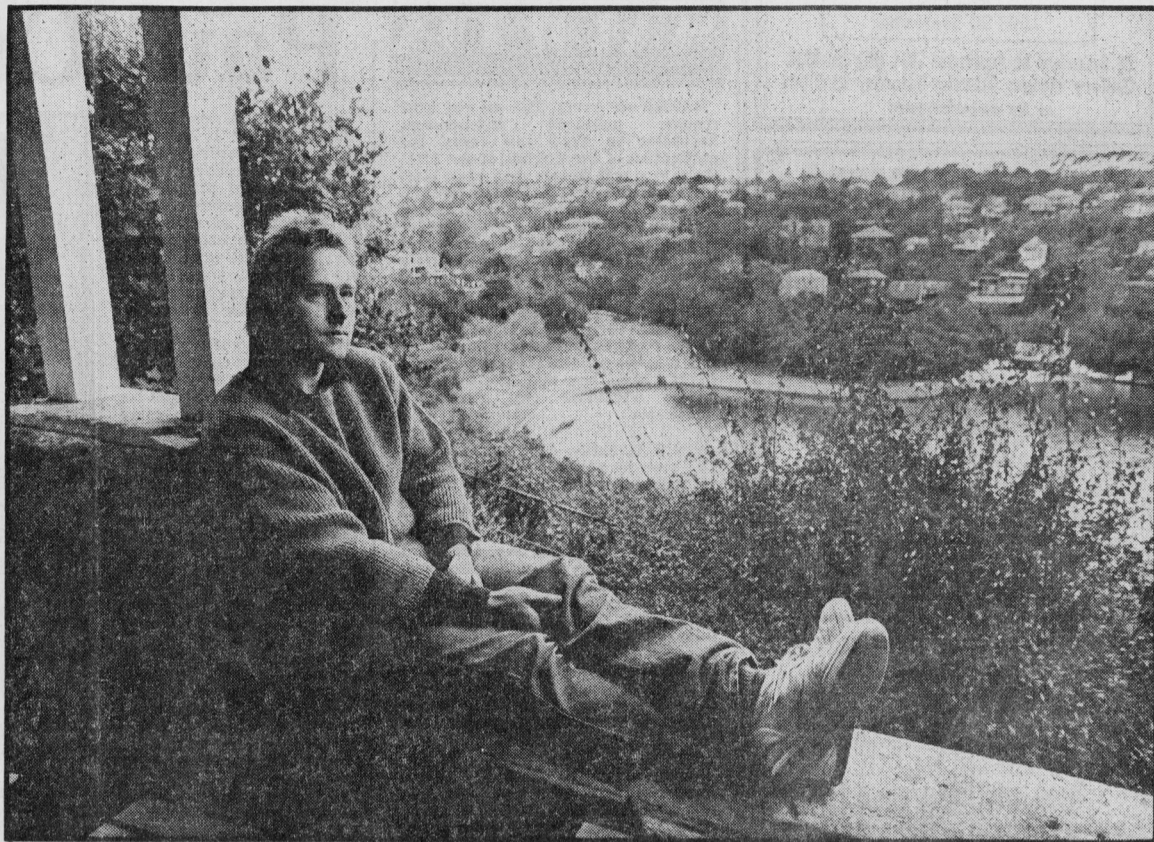
Bands of spectra appear in several of his paintings, notably in one made last year called *The Continent of Light* which is on show in Venice and will soon tour Australia in an exhibition of 14 of his recent works.

The Continent of Light is painted on 49 numbered canvas sketching boards, each 25 by 38cms, which are demountable and stackable when not assembled on a wall for display. Assemblages of these boards are his favoured medium at present.

Significantly, in an earlier version of the Pavilion the external frieze above the columns was to read "The Continent of Light." All of which is to make the point that while Tillers is given to rhetorical flourishes about the nature and quality of Australian culture, underlying them is a complex level of celebration that leads to the multi-layered meanings of his art.

That is the case with the mural and the pavilion's new thematic phrase, the somewhat loaded question: "Mammon or Millennial Eden?"

This will sit easily with the open-ended, gestural Baselitz figure and is itself a literary appropriation of an-



other artist's work, the patriotic Australian poet, Bernard O'Dowd.

It was arrived at after Alexander Tzannes asked Manning Clark to comment on "The Continent of Light" idea and the historian sent back "Mammon or Millennial Eden?" as an alternative. It is a paraphrase of two lines of O'Dowd's sonnet *Australia* which was happily written in 1901. As ornate as was the first pavilion, it asks if Australia will be "a new demesne for Mammon to infest? Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?"

Tillers is obviously pleased with the open-ended nature of the phrase "Mammon or Millennial Eden?" and the way it will complement the speculative mood of his mural. And, as with the pavilion, so with his art — its witty layered conceptualising often provokes baffled questions from viewers.

One of the most common is: why an art that appropriates the work of other artists? He gives the answer in his Venice Catalogue.

"In Australia the experience of works of art through mechanical reproduction always precedes their direct experience," he says, indulging again in what he calls "the rhetoric of reproduction."

In *The Island of the Dead* mechanical reproduction "is a purgatory or limbo for image patterns," he adds.

However, the issue has far deeper underpinnings than that. His parents are Latvian-born and came to Australia in the late 40s as "Displaced Persons" or "DPs," as immigrants displaced by successive German and Soviet occupations of eastern Europe were called immediately after the 1939-45 war.

Their displacement from one side of the world to another and Tillers' upbringing in his parents' "Latvian ghetto of two" have made him a kind of DP *manque*.

As Daniel Thomas has pointed out in an essay for American consumption, Tillers' fascination with the displacement of images has thus become a metaphor for his own cultural displacement as well as the compelling force of his art.

Basing his art on "dead" reproductions of high-art paintings found in magazines and books, he reverses the process of reproduction. Selecting an image, he draws a fine grid on it so that each tiny section can be displaced and enlarged onto his canvas boards using acrylic paint, oilstick and occasionally oil paint.

The process produces enormous changes in scale as will be seen in one of the major works from the Biennale called *Mount Analogue* which is made from 165 canvas boards and is nearly three metres by six metres when assembled.

It is based on Eugen von Guérard's masterwork *Mount Kosciuszko* in the Australian National Gallery which was painted in 1864 and measures a mere 66.5 by 116.8cms.

There are many things which can be read into the reproduction of this reputedly richly toned work, starting with the cultural displacement metaphor.

And that is not all. Tillers regards the work as his "big rock painting" because it follows paintings of reproductions of rocks from the conceptual art of Richard Long.

As for the title, *Mount Analogue* comes from a parable by Rene Daumal which, Tillers says, tells of a group of explorers who seek to find such a mountain as part of "life's search."

It should also be recorded here that the Australian National Gallery (ANG) has decided to join this exercise in resonating analogies by acquiring *Mount Analogue* for its Australian collection.

As analogues, or parallels, go, Tillers' current domestic arrangements also tell a semiotic story. Since 1981 he and Jennifer Slatyer, his wife and a former archaeologist, have lived on the ground floor of a cliff-face house in Mosman, near Sirius Cove in Sydney Harbour.

From its verandah they look down on the site of the historic artists' camp of the 1890s where Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton painted what Daniel Thomas in the Venice catalogue calls "glittering images of sun-glare, now among the most prized icons in Australia's national culture."

Daniel Thomas says Sirius Cove has to be seen as a "site of power" for the artist, a place of historic moment for Australian art.

"I guess my aspirations are to be part of what I call the real art world," he says. "It probably doesn't exist as an entity — it's really my view of the artists I like, like Enzo Cucchi, Julian Schnabel, David Salle, you could keep rattling the names off."

"They're all my age and I guess they're my peers and I always feel Australians are being denied being part of that sort of system."

But would that "system" produce testing public commissions such as the Federation Pavilion mural?

"Probably not," he says. "And I really do feel nervous about this one because it's such a perfect opportunity, because the success of the whole project depends on the success of that image."

One could add that perhaps its success will also mean that the artist of cultural displacement is brought closer to home.

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Picture: ALAN PRYKE