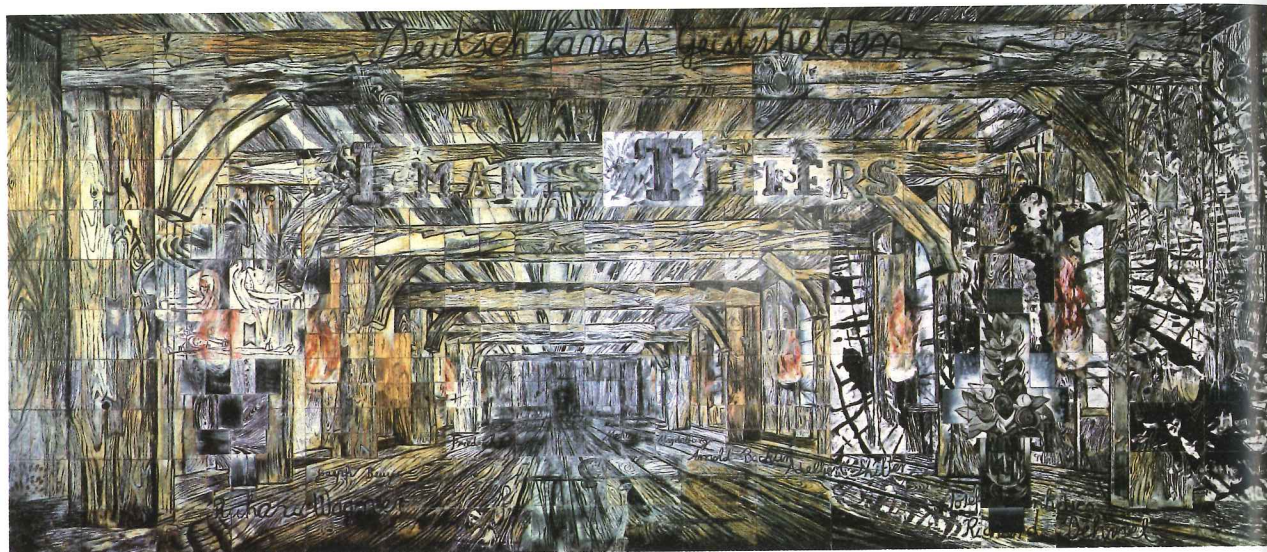


Imants Tillers in Canberra

CHRISTOPHER CHAPMAN

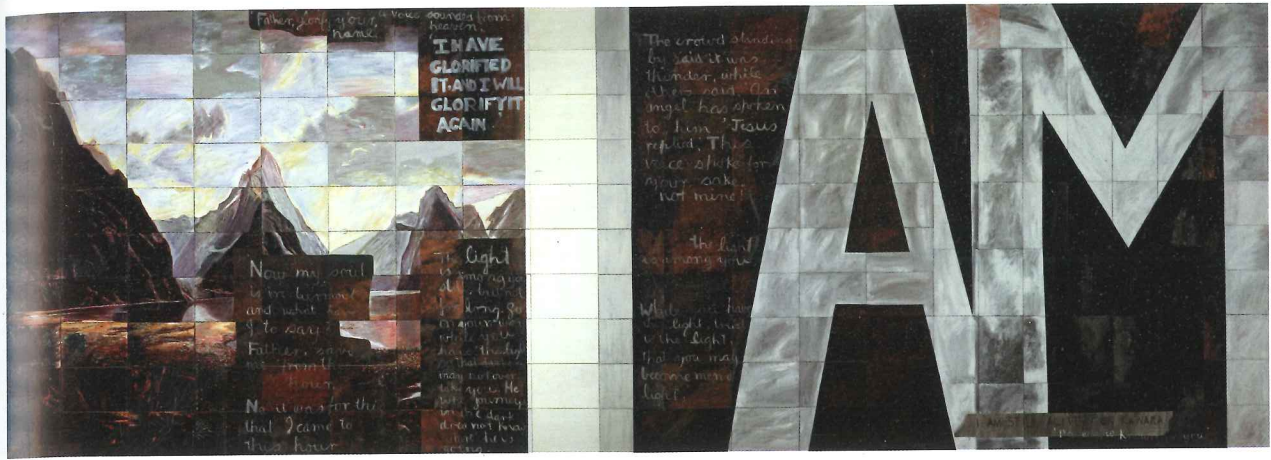


Imants Tillers, *Heart of the wood*, 1985, oilstick, charcoal, oil and synthetic polymer paint on 338 canvasboards. Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, JW Power Bequest.

Deborah Hart, Senior Curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) and curator of the impressively muscular exhibition *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, begins her comprehensive article on the artist in the gallery's members' magazine *artonview* by stating that 'Imants Tillers is one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary artists, who established a national and international reputation in the early 1980s'.¹ This statement, true as it is, seems a necessary evil that clouds the integrity and value of Tillers's work. In the same issue of the magazine we are told that Michael Riley was one of the most important Indigenous visual artists of the past two decades' and Shane Cotton 'has emerged as one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most significant contemporary painters'.² This might seem like an insignificant and even hypocritical point to raise, but it is relevant to the place of contemporary art and artists in art museums, and particularly at the National Gallery. Surely if an artist is deemed worthy of exhibition or collection by such an institution, their status as 'most important / significant' is a given? If these artists are indeed *outstanding in their field*, to borrow corporate jargon, then they deserve the support of the big art institutions whose job it is duly recognise, facilitate scholarly research on, and provide for broad interpretation of their work. Why is the NGA presenting a survey exhibition of the work of Imants Tillers as opposed to someone else? Not just because he is 'one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary artists'?

The exhibition is formatted as three large rooms in the NGA's temporary exhibitions wing, each room dealing with a decade since the 1980s. The show is prefaced by a small 'introductory' room that contains the NGA's work *Landing sites: A, B, C* 2000, installed into the corner of the space above the newly-created stack work *Art is an action* 2006 (artist's collection). Also in this space is a plasma screen on which is presented former NGA director Betty Churcher's 1999 ABC television feature on Tillers from her *Eye to Eye* series. This introduction neatly sums up what is to come. The Churcher program gives an insight into the artist's methodologies and gives him a face and a voice, the wall-mounted painting provides a series of clues to the materiality and engagement with imagery that the viewer is about to encounter, and the new stack work reveals an important aspect of Tillers's conceptual practice, that of his numbered canvas board system, the 'Book of Power'. The monochromatic silver-white and black organic imagery visible on the top of stacks recalls the work of Jackson Pollock and details of a snow-and-mountain landscape (like Eugene von Guérard's *Kosciusko*), together a nicely evocative consolidation of Tillers's ideas. Then the viewer encounters the earliest work in the show, the small six-panel *A life of blank VI* 1984 (private collection, Canberra), a reworking of Giorgio de Chirico's 1924 self-portrait which in Tillers's hands becomes a symbol of 'the artist' him or herself, as well as a self-portrait of Tillers himself.

The first room of the Tillers show containing seven monumental works from the 1980s (with the exception



Imants Tillers, *Hiatus*, 1987, oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 190 canvasboards. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

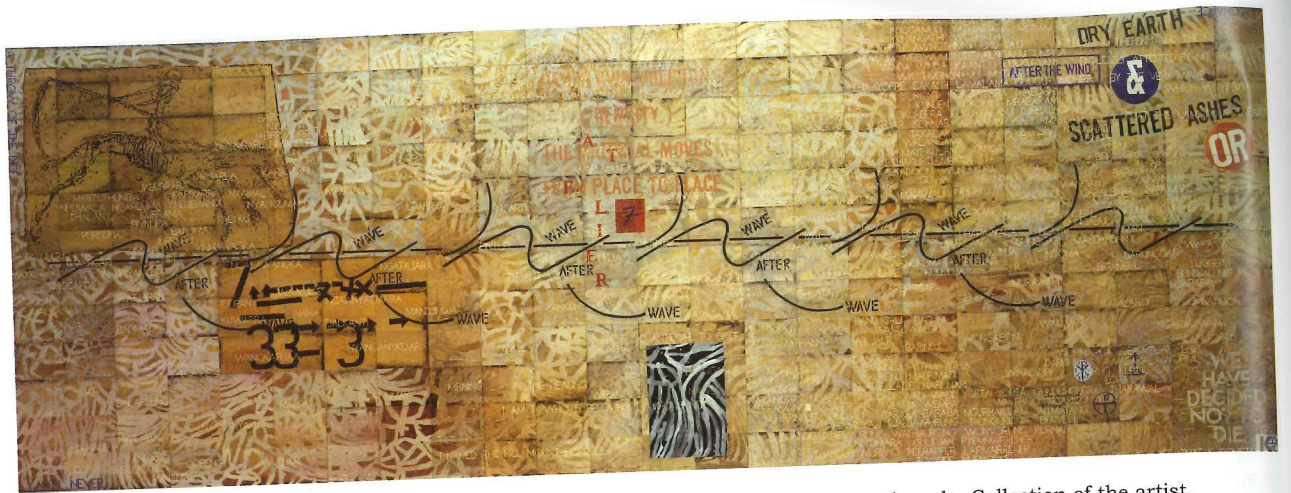
of *Inherited absolute* of 1992, collection Orange Regional Gallery) is enormously powerful. The texture and tone of these works is palpable – smeary oil stick over metallic paint – so that the room is dense with a rust-toned gravity. This is appropriate given the subject matter of the works and their historical import. *Heart of the wood* 1985 (collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) riffing on Anselm Kiefer's *Germany's spiritual heroes* 1973, conveys a compelling sense of internal spatial dynamics and an overwhelming physicality. *Hiatus* 1987 (collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki) is a take on Colin McCahon's *Victory over death 2* 1970 in the NGA collection, which incorporates a reference to a von Guérard landscape of New Zealand's Milford Sound. This work too commands an impressive authority. This may have something to do with the scale ratio of Tillers's 'versions' to the original works which is almost equivalent in each case (all about six-and-a-half metres in length), as opposed to his substantial scaling up of von Guérard's *North-east view from the northern top of Mount Kosciuszko* 1863 into *Mount Analogue* 1985 (both collection NGA). All of these works have travelled the past twenty-odd years very well, and make an impressive group. This room too, despite its compactness, represents one of the first serious representations of the 1980s work of a major Australian contemporary artist of Tillers's generation and signals the need for scholarly museum surveys of work by artists including Jenny Watson, Dale Frank, Susan Norrie, Peter Tyndall and John

Nixon. In 2003-04 the National Gallery of Victoria held a Peter Booth retrospective, last year Newcastle Region Art Gallery surveyed thirty five years of Mike Parr's work, and currently the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Sydney has a major survey of Juan Davila's work.*

The second room focuses on Tillers's four *Diaspora* works of 1992 through 1996, which bear a distinct shift in texture from the eighties works. These paintings have a smoother surface and in their montage qualities appear graphically 'alert' and seem to flicker and convey a strong sense of movement. Without attempting to decode these works (Deborah Hart does a great job of this in the catalogue), what is apparent is the number and range of 'spiritual' symbols that suggest a move towards the exploration of spirituality and metaphysics in Tillers's work overall, as well as the development of an arcane or esoteric language of signs. These enormous paintings, each over nine metres in length, create a fantastically active energy in this second room, and repay patient consideration. The final room contains a number of works created since 1997 including the significant *Terra incognita* 2005 (artist's collection) which incorporates references to Indigenous painter Emily Kam Ngwarray's yam dreaming iconography, and lists the 460 Australian Aboriginal language groups included on the map of Aboriginal Australia created by David Horton and published by the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. In addition to the work's complex and rich commentaries on place and mapping,



Imants Tillers, *Paradiso*, 1994, oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 299 canvasboards. The Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.



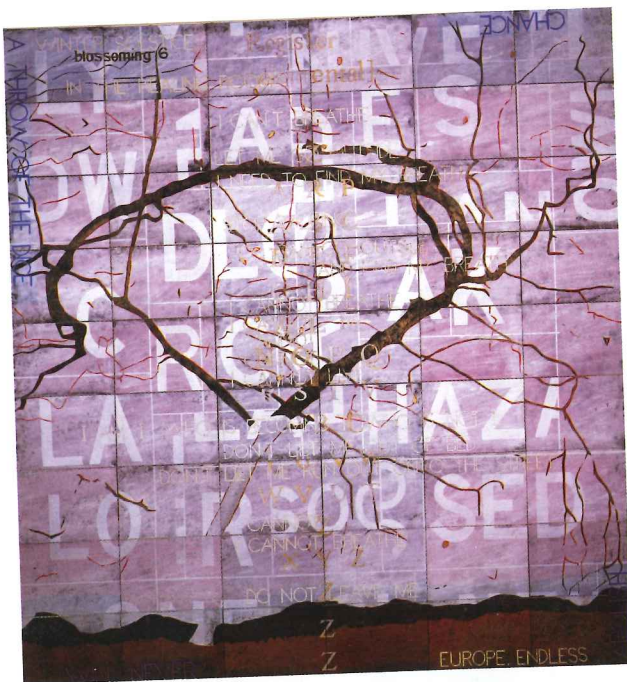
Imants Tillers, *Terra incognita*, 2005, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 288 canvasboards. Collection of the artist.

Tillers has stated his attraction to the beauty of these names. He writes with regard to encountering Horton's map around 2000 that 'I recognised words like Ngarigo, Arrernte, Luritja, Badjala, Wiradjuri, Adnyamathanha as a kind of eloquent readymade poetry that I would like to include in my future paintings.'³ This painting and others that deal with poetics of the landscape, like *Blossoming 6* 2005 (private collection, USA) also seem to evoke aspects the colourful palette of yellows and pinks typical of Ngarray and other Utopia artists. The exhibition and catalogue also makes clear the influence of the landscape on his work of the past decade of the Monaro plains around Cooma where Tillers and his family have lived since 1996. As the exhibition is prefaced with the stack work *Art is an action* 2006 it ends with a coda in the form of *Telepathic music* 1994 (artist's collection), a set of individual canvas boards displayed on music stands. These purely abstract

paintings offer a sense of quietude and purity in relation to the densely referential nature of the other works in the exhibition and make for a considered close.

A handsomely produced, lucid and rigorous book accompanies the exhibition. Deborah Hart beautifully explicates Tillers's complex themes and artistic methodologies in her prefacing essays, the scope of which also explain the relevance of the exhibition's particular emphases. Hart makes accessible the conceptual imperatives that drive Tillers's work, and effectively highlights its poetic and ethical concerns above its relevance to theoretical discourses. Through a very close reading of the symbolism of the imagery Tillers draws upon and incorporates into his work, Hart personalises it. More than just identifying the origins of Tillers's 'appropriated' imagery, which is a highly useful exercise in itself, Hart's interpretation effectively allows us to understand and empathise with the artist's intimate relationship to this material.

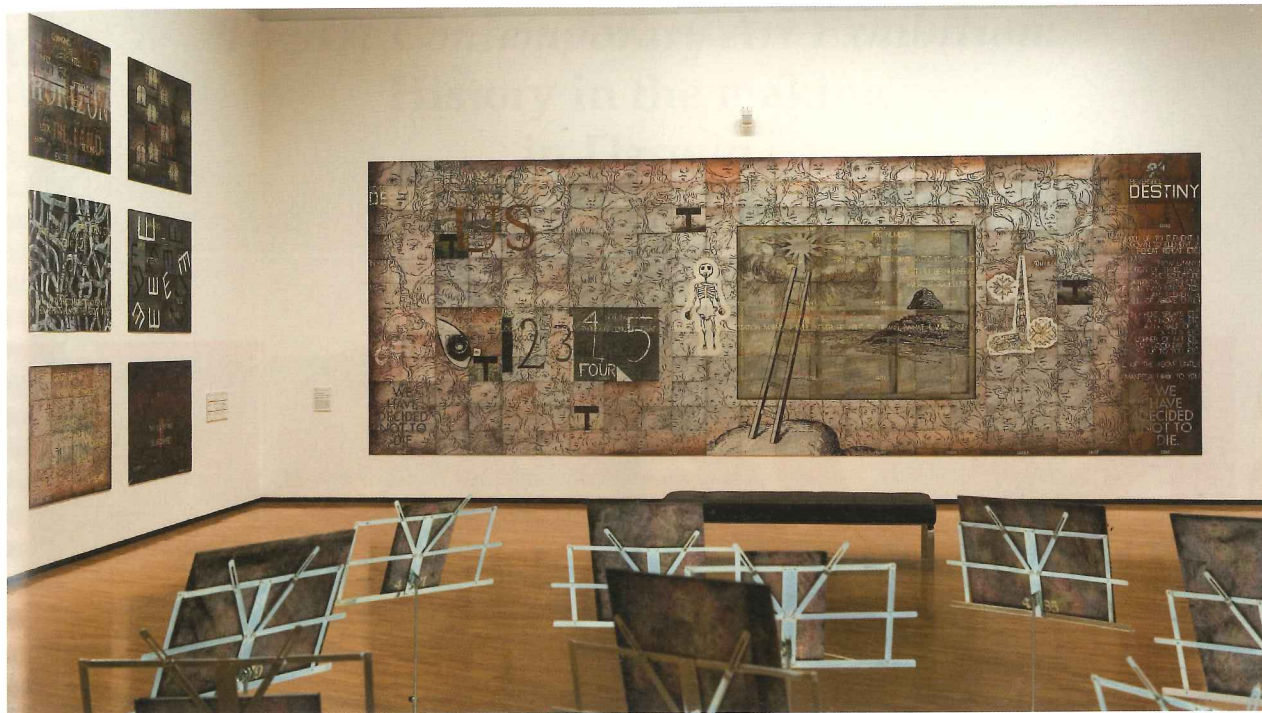
Since the late 1990s a belief in the importance of new developments in global contemporary art has seemed lacking at the NGA. Exhibitions of contemporary art over the past ten years have often been travelling shows organised by other institutions, and dedicated space for the NGA's collection of Australian and international works produced since the late 1980s has steadily diminished. After remaining for many years a static display of 1980s art, save for the brief appearance of a domestic-scale print by Damien Hirst and the populist *Pregnant woman* by Ron Mueck, the room of 'contemporary' international art has now been replaced with the relocated *Aboriginal Memorial*, and the rehanging of international art will end with art of the 1960s.⁴ For this reason the exhibitions of work by Tillers and Riley (*Michael Riley: sights unseen*, concurrent with the Tillers exhibition at the NGA) are highly significant. Deborah Hart's exhibition of Tillers's work is a great achievement.



Imants Tillers, *Blossoming 6*, 2005, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 54 canvasboards. Private collection. Courtesy of Sherman Galleries, Sydney. Photo Paul Green.

Notes

- 1 Deborah Hart, 'Imants Tillers: one world many visions', *artonview*, 46, Winter 2006, p 6.
- 2 Various authors and pages in *artonview*, 46, Winter 2006.
- 3 Imants Tillers, 'Imants Tillers discusses Terra incognita & Terra negata', *artonview*, 46, Winter 2006, p 14.
- 4 A gallery floorplan currently displayed at the entry to the entry-level galleries shows rooms of art that will begin



Installation view of *Imants Tillers: One world many visions* at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2006, with: *Telepathic music*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 9 double-sided canvasboards, and 9 K brand music stands, collection of the artist (foreground); and *Monaro*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 288 canvasboards, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Patricia Lucille Bernard Bequest Fund and Don Mitchell Bequest Fund 2005 (back wall).

with Courbet and end with Minimalism / Conceptualism. In the Australian art galleries, the contemporary room consists mostly of paintings (with the exception of sculptors Fiona Hall and Hossein Valamanesh) and represents contemporary practice by the works of Philip Wolfhagen, Tim Johnson, William Robinson, Guan Wei, Robert MacPherson, Brent Harris, Indigenous painters Gulumbu Yunupingu, Walangkura Napanangka and Laura Brown Napanangka, and New Zealander Shane Cotton. This current display could evoke perceptions of bias, since Wolfhagen, Valamanesh, Wei and Cotton are all represented by Sydney's Sherman Galleries, as is Imants Tillers, whose director Gene Sherman is also a member of the NGA's Foundation Board, which leverages fundraising and promotion for the gallery.

The exhibition *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, was at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, from 14 July to 16 October this year.

Christopher Chapman was a curator at the National Gallery of Australia from 1990 to 1995. He has just completed a PhD in the Art History department at the Australian National University and currently lectures in the Art Theory Workshop, ANU School of Art.

*Peter Booth: *Human/Nature* was reviewed by Mary Eagle in *AMA* #167, March 2004; a review of *Juan Davila* is forthcoming.

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