Chapter 3

The Island of the Dead: Postmodernism and the early 1980s

THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD: POSTMODERNISM AND THE EARLY 1980s

Modernism and Postmodernism: Defining Change

Modernism defined itself, against an inert, conservative past, through a stream of famous works that commenced with the School of Paris painters before the turn of the century and found its apotheosis in New York after World War II. A rupture occurred in the 1970s between two previously indivisible terms – modernism and formalism. The split between formalism (and its belief in quality) and modernist ideology (with its belief in change) was especially relevant in the 1980s and 1990s because it enabled art forms such as post-object and minimal art to be recycled without the increasingly rigid, teleological cultural baggage of modernist dogma.[1] The result of this rupture was a rehabilitation of formalism by many young artists during the revival in abstract painting of the late 1980s, as was discussed in the last chapter.

Postmodernism, too, relied upon an avant-garde imperative; it was a judgement upon the recent past and a declaration of independence. The attempts this century by both capitalists and the Left to remake society – the former through commodity consumption and the latter through social engineering – had, by the 1960s, led to profound fractures in both bourgeois liberalism and Leftist solidarity, resulting in a near-complete loss of faith in the earthly utopia that both had promised. Appropriately, then, fragmentation was a prime subject of postmodern art during the 1980s and early 1990s informing, most tellingly, the collaged spaces of Juan Davila's and Imants Tillers' paintings.

Where did postmodernism come from? Various intellectual currents – of structural anthropology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, film theory, formalist linguistics, French post-structural philosophy, and the new, hybrid, discipline of cultural studies – were crucial in its formation, usually grouped together under the rubric of Theory. The crucial influence of feminist precedents is often over-looked, but feminist art of the 1970s laid much of the groundwork for postmodern art in Australia. Feminist artists maintained that all art has a political dimension; feminist thinkers questioned established institutions and reasserted the role of the intellect in art, over dogmas of supposedly self-evident "creativity". In a new wave of criticism and theory in the 1980s, gay, lesbian and feminist writers analysed the representation of gender in the mass media and visual art. They realised that oppression was inherent in the very structures of language and codes of visual representation, and appropriated the discourse of psychoanalysis to explain the way that this worked.

Postmodern art of the 1980s oscillated between the extravagant, virulent mappings of art-historical hegemony and modernist domination seen in the paintings of Davila or Tillers, and a more nostalgic awareness of the fragility and multivalent character of the same modernism. These two artists demonstrated a critical relationship to modernism; each was a conceptual painter, employing paint on canvas instead of neon tubes or performances.

1 This complicated process was examined by many critics, including Canadian writer Thierry de Duve and, in Australia, Ian Burn and Rex Butler. See Thierry de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas", in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal*, MIT Press, Boston, 1989, pp. 244-310 and Rex Butler, "Generic Abstraction", *West* v.3 n.2, December 1991, pp. 49-57.

Previous page: detail of **3:1**.

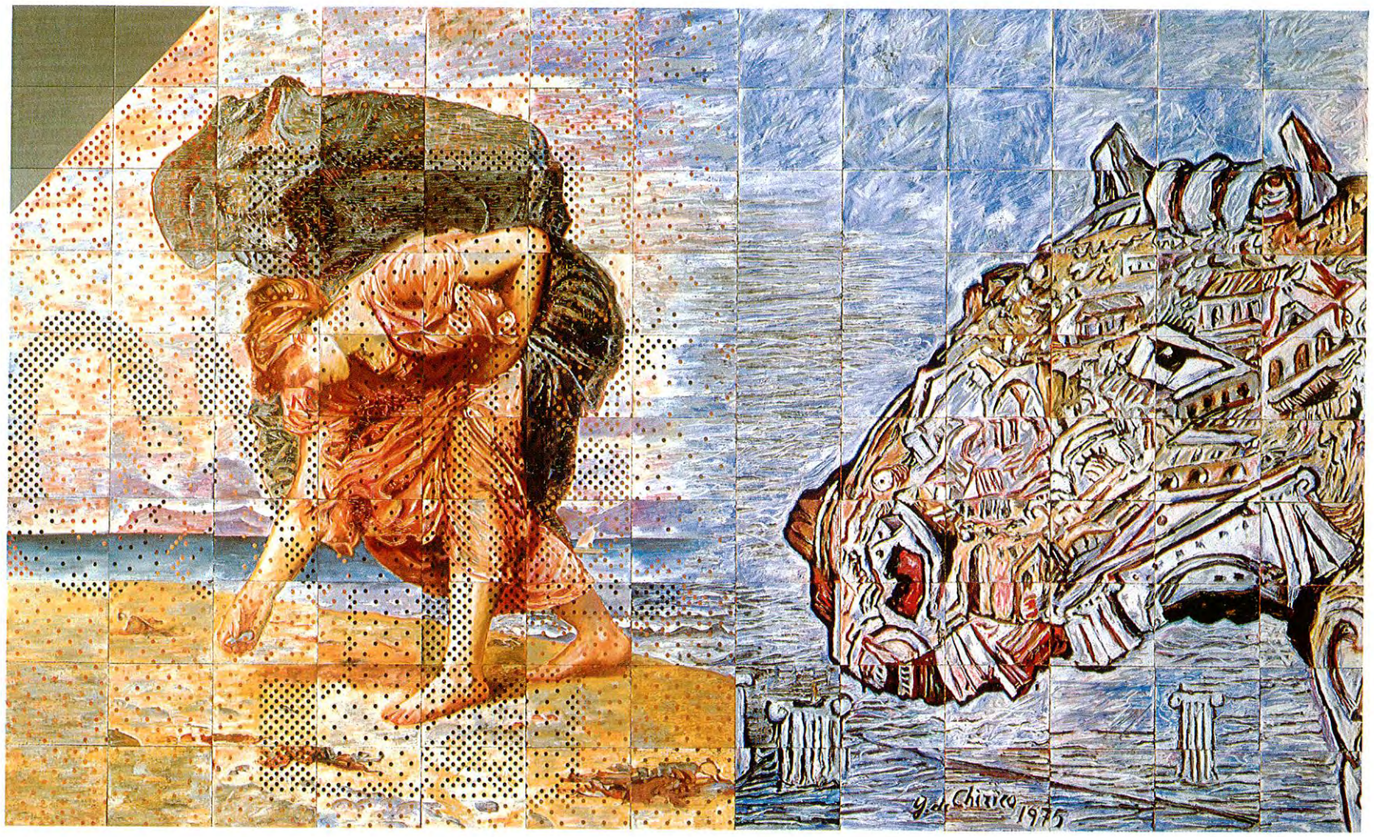
3:1 Imants Tillers, *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar*, 1986, oil, oilstick and synthetic polymer paint on 130 canvasboards, 279 x 462 cm. Courtesy Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

IMANTS TILLERS: THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD

Appropriation, Intertextuality and a Counter-history of Modernism

Imants Tillers has been an extraordinarily influential artist. With prescient intelligence, his paintings of the early 1980s either prefigured or summarised other artists' concerns: they took the history of art as both subject and language; they described the gap

3:1



3:1

between the periphery and the centre. Since these were relationships of intense longing for most mainstream Australian artists, and the object of desire – membership of the great metropolitan centres of the art world such as New York – was imbued with such a fatal attraction, Tillers' paintings became a widely accepted Australian reference-point for postmodern art. His working method was quotation; he copied other artists' work. Tillers' appropriations were, however, based on his unexpectedly traditional view of art as a continuum and thus his copies had a timeless quality, rather like the borrowings of pre-modernist artists from Classical models.

Tillers' *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar*, 1986, was one of a group of paintings exhibited as the Australian offering at the 1986 Venice Biennale, the world's foremost showcase for contemporary art. Like many of the artist's works from this period, the painting was a magisterial, seamless fusion of contemporary art's most glamorous icons with Tillers' own previous hermetic productions, which were often fastidious exercises in the reproduction of other reproductions, whether of amateur landscapes or of out-of-register postcards. As with all his pictures since 1981, *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* was composed of an accumulated grid of small canvasboards, similar to those used by amateur painters but arranged to form a large, spectacular whole. The images were all copies, derived from art reproductions in magazines or books, or references to Tillers' own earlier work. These gridded sources were transferred, square by square, to the canvasboards. The process was not rigidly mechanical, so that the quotations emerged, when arranged together, in a painterly fashion and, through the mistakes and hesitations in the copying process, textures and brushstrokes accrued. Tillers restricted his borrowing to an easily identifiable range of images, like other postmodern artists who relied on the appropriation of pre-existing sources from the media. Tillers described his working method thus:

> The new paintings for this exhibition continue the process I have been using since 1981. Each painting derives wholly or partially from reproduced images found in magazines and catalogues. The found images are gridded up and then painted piece by piece, square by square onto small rectangular canvas boards. The canvas boards are all numbered as I paint them in a continuous sequence from one to infinity – and any one of them can be recombined to form a new work. In this way an area of failed painting is never wasted but can become ground in another subsequent work …[2]

Regardless of his matter-of-fact tone, *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* was an enigmatic image: a horse's head composed of classical buildings; a woman, overshadowed by a monstrous dark form, collecting shells on a beach; classical columns floating in a vast atmospheric sea that merges into pink sky; the whole overlaid with a semi-random dot screen, truncated at the top left corner by a flat field of grey. Each of the parts came from somewhere else: the animal head was borrowed from a painting by the Italian Metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico (Tillers' picture was signed "de Chirico, 1975"); the woman was borrowed from a painting by the 19th-century English Academician Lord Leighton; the flat corner was a reference to formalist painting; the columns were reminiscent of neo-expressionist painting (that of Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi) current in the early 1980s; the sea of colour and dots referred to German neo-expressionist Sigmar Polke.

De Chirico's interest in determinedly anti-modern modes of representation, his

2 Imants Tillers, "Statement by the artist, February 1986," in *Origins Originality + Beyond*, 6th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1986, p. 270.

repeated copying of his earlier works, and his hybrid, semi-Academic, semi-Metaphysical late works were an important example for Tillers, whose paintings functioned rather like one of the Italian artist's composite images: the "face" (the appearance of an integrated image) of a painting was composed out of parts taken from other people's art. A large part of the experience of Tillers' painting lay in a similar type of reading – the recognition of the artist's sources and the correlation of our own knowledge with Tillers' deformations. Imants Tillers' animal head (indeed the whole picture) belonged to this category. Assembled out of a landslide of recognisable or hermetic components, *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* cohered into the shape of a painting, but also dissolved into a cross-cultural amalgam of incidents that could be read like a map. Each element was double-coded, carrying two (or more) meanings and dependent on an awareness of its eclecticism and our commentary on those references. The juxtapositions were cryptic and arbitrary: the space was fractured and discontinuous, sliding from formal abstraction to the dream-space of surrealism. *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar*, for all its cumbersome production, or perhaps because of it, had a contradictory, sensuous surreality and extravagance that probably exceeded the artist's own intentions.

Imants Tillers' painting was a compendium of postmodern art. Its relation to sources and inspiration was pluralist and eclectic to the point of parody. Moreover, Tillers' paintings took as their point of departure the idea that postmodernity represented the terminal crisis of 20th century modernisation and a general loss of faith in progress. The most cursory survey of popular commentary at the end of the 20th century showed widespread realisation of the gap between the optimistic ideas of modernity at the start of the century and the contemporary reality of acid rain, AIDS, nuclear pollution and urban decay. Postmodern culture had little faith in progress, science and the dogma that "new is best". This widespread pessimism was reflected in the writing of postmodern theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, who observed that "the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take".[3]

Postmodernism, therefore, was one result of the cultural crisis of modernism. Tillers was clearly aware of that crisis; thus his adoption of de Chirico, a renegade modernist turned academician, as model. He was also conscious that his position as an artist of Latvian origins, working at a desk in a small studio in Sydney, was evidence that "our" culture was not homogeneous. When he borrowed images from international artists such as Anselm Kiefer or Sigmar Polke, Tillers asked his audience both to recognise the other artists' images and to see that, in the act of copying, something else had been added. His borrowing had clear implications in New York and, in such centres, it represented a questioning of originality and the illustration of intertextuality. At the periphery, in Australia, it had other implications. Tillers stated:

> There are different issues at work, say in America or Australia, although we're all subject to the same bombardment of images. In Australia I still feel a sense of isolation, whether its real or not, and a feeling of marginality and provincialism.[4]

If Imants Tillers' painting was a critique of modernism, as he maintained, what were the main points of this postmodern inquiry? First, the hollowness of modernist authority and its associated, often commercially-driven, mythologies, such as the romantic privilege of genius, implied the end of artistic progress. This, in turn, exposed the fallacy of avant-garde art at the cutting edge as necessarily subversive of established cultural orders: truly

3 Jean-François Lyotard (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p. 81. Also see pp. 78-79.

4 Imants Tillers, interview, in Sandy Nairne, *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1987, p. 224.

marginal groups – gays, women, ethnic minorities and people of colour – were not often included in avant-garde coteries in any equitable way. *The Hyperborean and the Speluncar* obviously took apart the idea of artistic mastery, implying that terms like genius, originality and heroic individualism were neither necessary nor value-free.

Appropriation as a strategy had a long history: before the age of mechanical reproduction, painted copies had the dual functions of replicas and reinterpretations. Changing historical connotations of "imitation" were crucial to an understanding of the role of appropriation. During the 19th century the meaning of the word "imitation" shifted from "invention" to "facsimile"; at the same time, copying was an artistic method of learning and could provide a replica of an absent masterpiece. Modernist painters and theorists later shifted their attention from the ideas represented in the work of art, to the artists' means of representation, through radical (and hence original) reinterpretations.

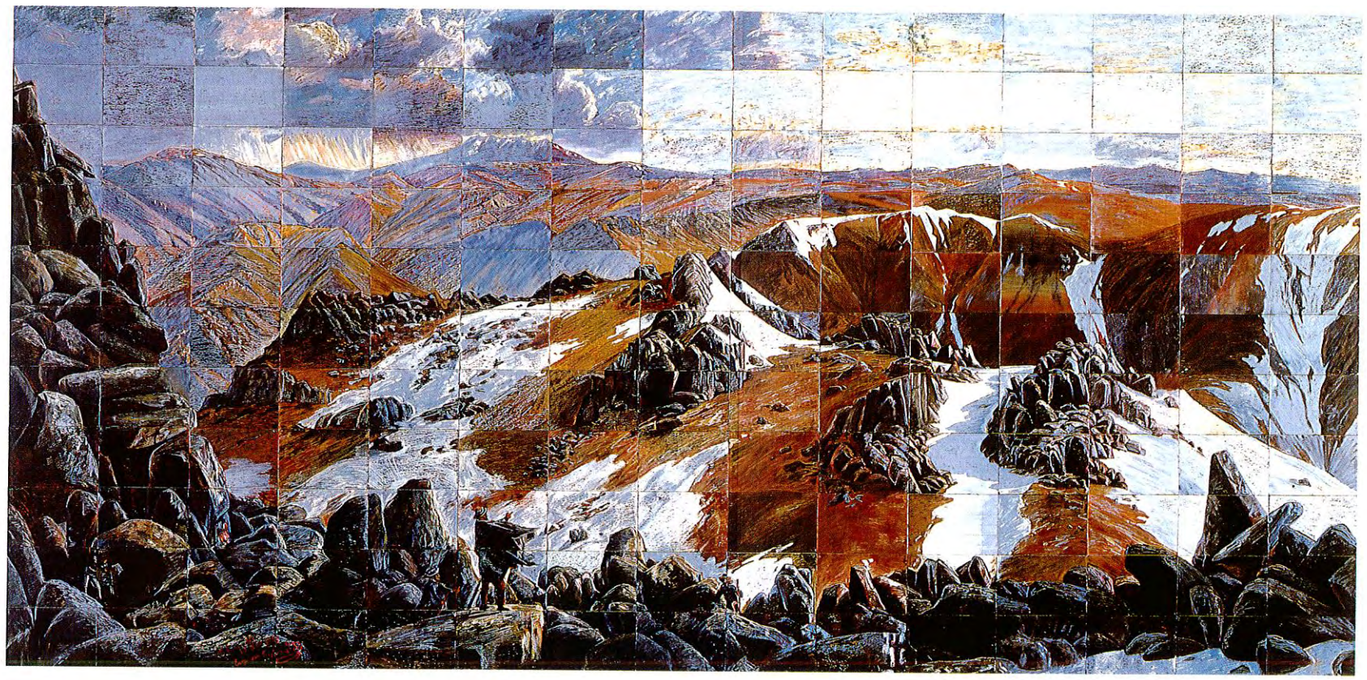
Tillers reversed this equation; his theorisation of synchronicity and coincidence replaced personal choice and style with the impersonal guidance of destiny and synchronicity. Because he blurred the division between straightforward statement, parody and pastiche in his paintings and in comments about his work, his own belief in the supernatural agency of fate (Tillers was always careful to distinguish his own interest *in* occult agencies from identification *with* them) was less relevant than his cultivation of ambiguity. It was, then, no accident that Tillers' most important artistic model was de Chirico, since Classicism offered an equally timeless, synchronistic view of artistic style and invention: its theorists assumed that the Self would naturally appear in all faithful copies. Widespread deference to art as a transcendental category of experience, at the height of modernism, went hand in hand with an almost religious faith in originality and authenticity. Efficient reproduction of the category "art", however, was now enough to generate deference, as Tillers' painting showed. Originality could be fabricated, but remained important to many people.

The Book of Power: From Little Bay to Latvia

Imants Tillers' early works were installations; their concern with laborious process and carefully planned intellectual schema reflected his university training in architecture and his 1969 experience as a young assistant during Christo and Jeanne-Claude's famous wrapping of Sydney's Little Bay. *Conversations with the Bride*, 1975, was an installation of enamelled metal miniatures set on music-stands. On exhibition in Melbourne at Storey Hall, it was surrounded by an arrangement of notebooks. The work was an attempt to surpass Marcel Duchamp's famous *Large Glass*, 1915-23. On each small enamelled painting, Tillers montaged parts of three images onto each other: *Summer*, 1909, a traditional landscape by Hans Heysen; a half-tone photograph of a eucalypt from a textbook on Australian trees; and details from the *Large Glass*. The images of collision were, according to Tillers' notebooks, the manifestation of a shadow cast onto three-dimensional space by a mysterious four-dimensional figure. Duchamp's *Large Glass* had been the result of one miraculous communication; Tillers' work was another.

In late 1981 Tillers commenced work on the canvasboard paintings for which he is now best known. They were marked by two obvious characteristics: his adaptation of reproduced images by other artists and the layering of these second-hand, mechanically reproduced sources on top of each other, like transparencies, so that several images coexisted in the same ambiguous space. Tillers identified Australia as a postmodern

3:2 Imants Tillers, *Mount Analogue*, 1985, oilstick, synthetic polymer paint on 165 canvasboards, 279 x 571 cm. Photo: Fern Hinchcliff. Courtesy Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.



3:2

graveyard of reproduced images. The landscape described by his appropriations was, therefore, an "Island of the Dead".

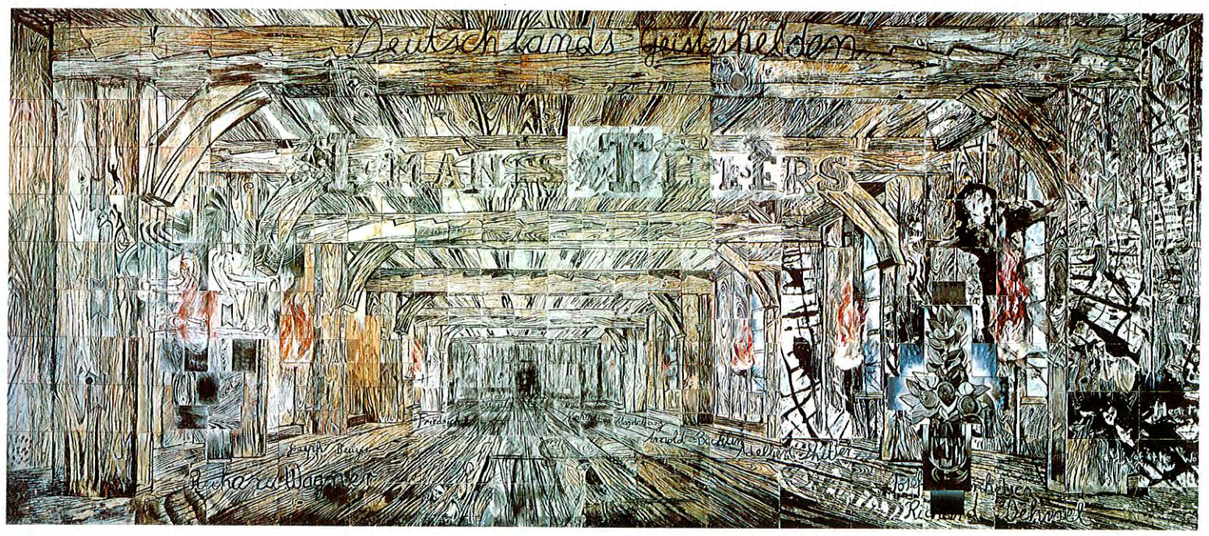
In assessing both the meaning of Tillers' juxtapositions and their logic, the role of coincidence and free association must be emphasised. Tillers' oeuvre proceeded according to the logic of synchronicity – of the simultaneous occurrence of unrelated events – yet he always attached hermetic significations to these coincidences so that they appeared with the aura of destiny shaped by hidden forces.[5] Similarly, Tillers conceived his canvasboard paintings as components of one vast and ever-expanding work, The Book of Power. Tillers' curator and companion, Jennifer Slatyer, observed in 1988 that Tillers saw his work "in terms of [an] huge all-inclusive book where each canvasboard panel is a page in the book and each page is numbered from one to infinity. In fact at this moment you are at the page marked 17187 and there is a long way to go."[6] By 1992, Slatyer's count was 200 canvasboard works and 33794 panels or "pages".

Tillers' works of the early 1980s were unforgettable for the range of their references and sheer ambition. *Mount Analogue*, 1985, imitated Eugene von Guerard's *North-East View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko*, 1863; the title was a reference to René Daumal's book of the same name. Daumal recounted the story of a band of explorers in search of the mountain view from which the secrets of the universe would be revealed; ironically, the author died in 1944 before the work was finished. This hermetic reference and the picture's mural-like sweep assured a grandeur that quite overpowered any ironic reading and forever rewrote the original. With *Heart of the Wood*, 1985, Tillers restaged Anselm Kiefer's early *Germany's Spiritual Heroes*, 1973, replacing Kiefer's funerary torches in the attic's sweeping space with Margaret Preston's 1930s banksia paintings (emblems of a nascent Australian nationalism). Some of Tillers' artistic "heroes" (Böcklin, for example) were also Kiefer's, and Tillers' name was emblazoned across the attic ceiling of the German artist's Hall of Fame. The dialogue with Kiefer and Preston, which relied on our prior knowledge of Tillers' models, was as complicated as *Conversations with the Bride*. Kiefer treated his (German) public's deification of heroes with considerable irony; Tillers

5 "In June 1989, while Tillers was dining with Arakawa and Madeleine Gins at Rocco's, a once-fashionable restaurant on Thomson Street in New York's SoHo, the conversation inevitably turned to de Chirico and their meeting with him in New York, seventeen years earlier. As Arakawa's memory slowly returns he recalls that they had also taken de Chirico to Rocco's. In fact they have sat at the same table that they were sitting at now and after a thoughtful pause and smile he added – yes, indeed Giorgio de Chirico had once occupied that same chair in which Tillers now found himself seated."
Recounted in Jennifer Slatyer, "The Enigma of Imitation: The Metaphysical Paintings of Imants Tillers", in *A Life of Blank: works by Imants Tillers*, Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hobart, February 1992, p.17.

6 Jennifer Slatyer, "The Life-Motif: Interview with Imants Tillers", *Art Monthly* n.9, April 1988, p.1.

3:3



3:3 Imants Tillers, *Heart of the Wood*, 1985, oilstick, charcoal, oil, synthetic polymer paint on 388 canvasboards, 280 x 648 cm. Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Courtesy Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

incorporated himself into Kiefer's tableau, achieving a weird disjunction – Tillers became the object of Kiefer's irony rather than the other way round; this paradox was surpassed in the early 1990s by Gordon Bennett's annexation and liquidation of Tillers' white Aboriginality.

Tillers was an articulate artist who wrote several influential essays including, in 1984, "In Perpetual Mourning". He described Australian culture as the "Island of the Dead" in an attempt to explain that the Australian condition was paradigmatically postmodern: "In this sense mechanical reproduction is a purgatory or limbo for image patterns. Like disembodied souls floating textureless in books, they are waiting to be reborn, to be recreated, to feel the actuality of their reality."[7] Here, he alluded to Walter Benjamin's highly influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".[8] Thus, the proliferation of art books dramatically changed our relationship to works of art. Since reproduction, according to Benjamin, robbed art of its uniqueness and stripped it of its aura, for Tillers art existed primarily as mechanical copies. Tillers' insight into the regional application of Benjamin's thesis was also his trademark. The practice of copying became, for Tillers, both subject matter and method; everything in his pictures was copied. The equivalence of mechanical reproduction made images far more susceptible to local readings. Tillers' argument, if not his art, was dependent on a certain elegant casuistry. He was based in Sydney, where the dominance of the art book was more or less true. In Melbourne, however, young artists were exposed to a significant collection of Old Master paintings at the National Gallery of Victoria. From the 1950s onwards, as well, major international travelling exhibitions toured Australian capital cities with sufficient frequency to belie Tillers' argument.

In an elegant essay, "Panorama: The Live, The Dead and the Living", Meaghan Morris pointed out that the postmodern rhetoric of death, divide and distance had acute relevance for Australia, since it spelt, literally, the terms of Australian history.[9] This particular identification – Island of the Dead – appealed to many critics, since it appeared to confer upon Australian artists and theorists a unique advantage in the formation of a postmodern critique of world culture. The assumption, of course, was that Australian experience was depthless because so new, that an apparent lack of history could be synthesised with a hyper-real postmodern condition. Of course, all this depthlessness was neither completely true nor unquestioned. Sydney art critic Pam Hansford disagreed, writing that:

> Whereas American and European experiences proceed from the recent memory of operational and then dwindling avant-gardes, there is a real sense in which Australia has never had an avant-garde tradition with its emphasis on self-conscious failure and nihilism, and hence presumably has nothing to mourn.[10]

What did it mean to have a longing to be part of something that was dead? Hansford warned that ideas imported whole from Europe and America would be inadequate to describe Australian art. Seeing provincialism as an advantage rather than a curse obscured what she described as "the problem of the copying instinct which has traditionally beleaguered debates about an Australian creativity".[11] This phenomenon was described by art historians who, following Bernard Smith, traced the half-digested influence of European and American art in Australian art. Australian artists were frequently described as working in a state of formlessness – through a curious inversion of the European situation, they were oppressed by a lack, rather than a surfeit, of tradition. Thus,

7 Imants Tillers, "In Perpetual Mourning", *ZG/Art & Text*, Summer 1984, reprinted in Kerry Crowley (ed.), *Imants Tillers*, Venice Biennale, Australian Pavilion exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of South Australia and Visual Arts Board, Adelaide and Sydney, 1986, p.19.

8 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1935], in Hannah Arendt (ed.) (trans. Harry Zohn), *Illuminations*, Schoken Books, New York, 1969, pp. 217-251.

9 Meaghan Morris, "Panorama: The Live, The Dead and the Living", in Paul Foss (ed.), *Island in the Stream*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1988, p.164.

10 Pam Hansford, "An Invented Melancholia or ... How Weakness Becomes Strength", in *The present and recent past of Australian art and criticism*, special supplement, *Agenda* n.2, p. 24.

11 Hansford, "An Invented Melancholia", *Agenda* n.2, p. 25.

during the 1970s, artists such as Michael Johnson and critics like Patrick McCaughey pinned their ambitions on increasing ties with the metropolis, through frequent visits to New York and exhibitions overseas, to cancel out the embarrassing differences between centre and periphery. For Tillers, however, the twice-removed Australian experience of art was an advantage, because the contemporary Australian artist was absolutely at home in a postmodern morass of copies, fakes, kitsch, and the unattainable. Whether this celebration eliminated the melancholic longing to be up there with the big players of the international art world was debatable; Tillers was, somewhat ironically, one of a group of Australian artists, including Mike Parr, Jenny Watson and Juan Davila, to attain European and American gallery profiles during the 1980s.

Given its ambitiousness, Tillers' work achieved notoriety at a particularly appropriate time – during the 1980s art market boom. During those years, admission to the cosmopolitan gallery and museum circuit in the United States and Europe (a periodic fantasy of enterprising Australian artists) actually seemed possible because of a combination of circumstances which included a buoyant market and continual government support, through exhibitions and grants sponsored by the Australia Council. The centre, however, was reluctant to acknowledge Tillers' sophistication. Donald Kuspit reviewed the artist's 1984 New York show thus: "Taken together, the paintings in this exhibition constitute a super parody which reveals the limits of parody: the joke may have been on the joker".[12] The artist played upon his actual membership of our exotic Other. He exaggerated the degree of alienation involved in the production of his images until the multiple ironies of his best works were so coded that they became illegible.

With Tillers, as with many artists whether at the centre or the periphery, the wide impact of postmodernism was reflected in the production of hybrid paintings. He attempted a synthesis of many styles, and sought to demarcate a critical difference between his simulations and their models. The most salient feature of his works was, initially, their ability to be read internationally as Australian-yet-interesting, rather like *Crocodile Dundee*. The textuality of Tillers' complex paintings, though, was more that of a library – a fantastic library like the one described in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. They also embodied a type of mystical, cosmopolitan nomadism which proceeded like surrealist automatism, tracing an unreliable, imaginary map of the complicated secret histories of culture. Critic Gary Catalano ignored the metaphoric richness in Tillers' constructed worlds when he described him as "little more than a *pompier* for the pseudo-intellectuals".[13]

A decade or more later, Tillers' state of "perpetual mourning" can be seen to reflect several hypermannerist assumptions. For Melbourne artists especially, the presence of many major examples of European art in the National Gallery of Victoria always affected the course of their development. More importantly, representation did not make all images equivalent in quite the way Tillers saw, since local misreadings were far from random. Instead, they reflected the same secret histories and underground networks of synchronicity used by Tillers. His essays reflect the over-valuation of deadness that afflicted much of the 1980s. The conception of an overarching Book of Power was far more interesting than his artificial attempt to level inter-cultural experience.

Imants Tillers' most obvious achievement was his renegotiation of the tired old provincialism debate, so that the perceived Australian weakness of isolation was transformed into strength. Tillers' appropriation of contemporary art depended upon his citizenship

12 Donald Kuspit, "Imants Tillers at Bess Cutler", *Art in America* v. 73 n. 3, March 1985, p. 159.

13 Gary Catalano, "I will not make any more boring art", *The Age*, March 14 , 1990, p.14.

3:4 Imants Tillers, *Izkliede*, 1994, gouache, synthetic polymer paint, oilstick on 292 canvasboards, 305 x 914 cm. Photograph: Paul Green. Courtesy Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

3:4

of far-away Australia, the graveyard of images. From this distance he participated in the recirculation of Latvian and contemporary art world imagery. Tillers implied that Australian provincialism should be emphasised, exaggerating the natural tendency towards mimicry. The pattern of obsessive consumption and regurgitation of images that resulted in a fragmentation of authorship – once an indication of over-compensation and insecurity – could now be turned to local advantage. He anticipated many arguments about mimicry and postcolonialism that were to absorb younger artists several years later; in his superb large paintings of the mid-1990s these issues would surface again.

THEORY: THE HERMETIC DISCIPLINE

Theory and Fashion: The Sources of Postmodernism

Where did the theory of postmodern culture, so amply demonstrated in Tillers' paintings, come from? What was the intellectual context for his work? Postmodernism was a series of speculations on the totalities and fragmentation of present-day culture; it had a critical relation to recent history and art. It was influenced by an eclectic mix of many different, often contradictory theories. During the 1980s, artists, critics and art schools in Australia placed a high value on what was generically called postmodern theory, but which was in reality a disparate collection of philosophical texts translated from a number of French writers, including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray. Architectural and literary critics, amongst whom were architect Robert Venturi, architectural historian Charles Jencks and cultural theorist Ibn Hassan, were also influential.[14]

The link between the studio and the lecture theatre became a highly lauded attribute of advanced art. Many writers emphasised the inextricable identity of language and meaning; the self was seen as a social construction, woven from discourse and language. For art, this implied a fragmentation of authorship: if meaning was always dependent on the traces of other thoughts, and all authenticity derived from other structures, then artistic meanings were just as arbitrary and constructed, taking shape through the chance distinctions assigned by history.

14 For a brief account of the French thought that had considerable impact on Australian art during the 1980s, see Elizabeth Grosz, "French Feminisms and Representation", in Harriet Edquist (ed.), *Reasons to be cheerful #1*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, 1988.

The Arrival of Theory: The Academy and Jean Baudrillard

Postmodernism was simultaneously a cultural phenomenon of widespread interest to artists and writers and a hermetic intellectual discipline. Artists were faced during the 1980s by postmodern theories of representation and gender, and the obvious relevance of these theories to contemporary culture. They were aware of the importance of art criticism and postmodern theory, even if reluctantly and dismissively. Postmodern debate had considerable impact on younger artists. This was demonstrated by attendance at artists' forums about art criticism and theory organised by the curators of contemporary art spaces, and also by the short-lived prosperity of art magazines, such as *Tension*, which focused almost exclusively on contemporary postmodern artists.

The postmodernism that appeared both hermetic and alluring to artists was linked with the arrival of art criticism and art from Europe or the United States which was, in turn, influenced by post-structural philosophy. This art was sighted in Australian journals, specifically in *Art & Text, Agenda, Eyeline, West, Praxis M, Tension, On the Beach* and *Antithesis* from the early 1980s onwards. It was adopted with particular enthusiasm in Sydney. The art criticism was difficult, opaque and complicated; it was modelled on French post-structuralism, which had considerable influence on Australian art during the 1980s through the impact of charismatic feminist thinkers, including Sydney-based Elizabeth Grosz, who spoke at many forums organised for artists (for example at the George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, in 1988). One of the first conferences on French structural and post-structural theory to attract attention outside academic circles was held in 1981; "Foreign Bodies: Semiotics in/and Australia" included papers by Paul Foss, Meaghan Morris and Edward Colless.[15]

There was a wide, lively and well-informed audience keen to engage with a wide range of visiting theorists, published translations and theoretically-informed artists, many of whom travelled and lectured widely during the 1980s. When, for example, popular French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard visited Australia in 1984 for the Futur*Fall Conference in Sydney, he was mobbed by admiring audiences of several hundred people.[16] Organised by Elizabeth Grosz, Alan Cholodenko, Edward Colless and Terry Threadgold, the conference also featured the equally important postcolonial feminist theorist and Derrida translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In another example, American artist Barbara Kruger spoke in 1988 at Melbourne University to a large lecture theatre filled to capacity. Kruger remarked on the astounding enthusiasm for seminars like hers; she noted that the well-known Dia Foundation "Discussions in Contemporary Culture" forums in New York had attracted an audience only a fraction of that size.[17] Kruger's importance and celebrity had been established through theory-based art criticism; for all her obvious literacy and clear grasp of those issues, she was most animated and interested in questions about the specifics of her practice and images, and seemed almost impatient with the expectation that she would be a surrogate philosopher. A series of public forums on visual art organised during the Australian Bicentennial celebrations, in 1988, attracted sizeable audiences in Melbourne to hear speakers like Mike Parr, Jacques Delaruelle and David Bromfield cross rhetorical swords. As late as 1988, ten years after the initial impact of critical theory on contemporary artists, Melbourne art space 200 Gertrude Street saw younger artists turn out in considerable numbers to attend a series of difficult, often obscure, public lectures on contemporary French philosophers including Derrida, Kristeva, Blanchot and Barthes. These lectures, organised by

15 The conference papers were collected in *Foreign Bodies: Semiotics in/and Australia*, Local Consumption Collective, Sydney, 1981.

16 Baudrillard returned to Australia in April 1994 on the occasion of the exhibition of his photographs, again lecturing to overflow audiences. Australian customs officials impounded his photographs pending payment of duty; under Australian law, photographs are not designated as art and thus require a surprisingly large excise fee. Brisbane critic and Baudrillard expert Nicholas Zurbrugg commented: "The man who said art was dead then became a (photographic) artist, but when his art got to Australia the Customs said 'Your art isn't art'. Perhaps they've read him." Quoted in Matt Robbins, "Philosopher's art escapes the duty of reality", *The Australian*, April 22, 1994.

17 Barbara Kruger, conversation with the author, Melbourne, 1988.

Melbourne cultural theorist Kevin Murray, were collectively titled "The Judgement of Paris". As theory was incorporated into art-world discourse, it was cynically labelled "Artspeak". In Melbourne, the art critics for the *Age* – first Gary Catalano and, later, a similarly sceptical Christopher Heathcote – pilloried the importation of postmodern theory in their reviews, dismissed by Heathcote in one review headline with the taunt, "Anxiety and after – where are artists heading now?"[18] In Sydney their views were mirrored by John McDonald, art critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald.*

Theory was, by now, a cultural phenomenon of considerable influence and notoriety. This progress was epitomised by the fashionability of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard was a Professor of Sociology at the University of Paris, although his chief claim to fame was as a seminal, often-quoted theoretician. He was, for a short time in the early 1980s, the hero of a generation of young artists and critics, in Australia somewhat earlier than overseas. Baudrillard had cult status in Australia, where Paul Foss and Paul Patton translated his writings into English for magazines such as *Art & Text.* Although his key essay "*La précession des simulacres*" was published in 1978, the first English translation – "The Precession of Simulacra" – appeared in *Art & Text,* during 1983.[19] Despite their incoherence, his essays were nonetheless extremely seductive to art-world audiences. In New York's gallery precincts, his books were displayed next to bookshop cash registers. His writing occupied an ambivalent but typical position within critical theory, since he produced neither philosophical commentaries, as did Jacques Derrida, nor was he a historian of institutions and ideas, like Michel Foucault. Describing the cultural condition of the present, his writing was an amalgam of travelogue, philosophical musing and social theory.

"The Precession of Simulacra" was an elegant evocation of a contemporary world of simulation resembling science fiction, where pure images floated adrift from referents, and the real was superseded by sheer spectacle. The word "simulacrum" means likeness, phantom or shadow; in Baudrillard's diagnosis of contemporary reality, simulacra preceded reality. Baudrillard posited the end of the real, of the social and of the political. His essay was so cryptic that it was difficult to define its ideas without adopting his language; the concept of simulation was, however, central to an understanding of the art of appropriation, as practiced by artists such as Tillers, Juan Davila and, later, Susan Norrie. Appropriation was represented as a self-conscious critique of culture and society. These claims were based on an elision and denial of copying practices in the more distant past and, to explain this, the intertwined relationship of theory, art criticism and fashion must be remembered at all times. Artists during the 1980s demonstrated a touching conviction that there was a truth to discover in every discourse, even in a postmodernism that denied its very existence.

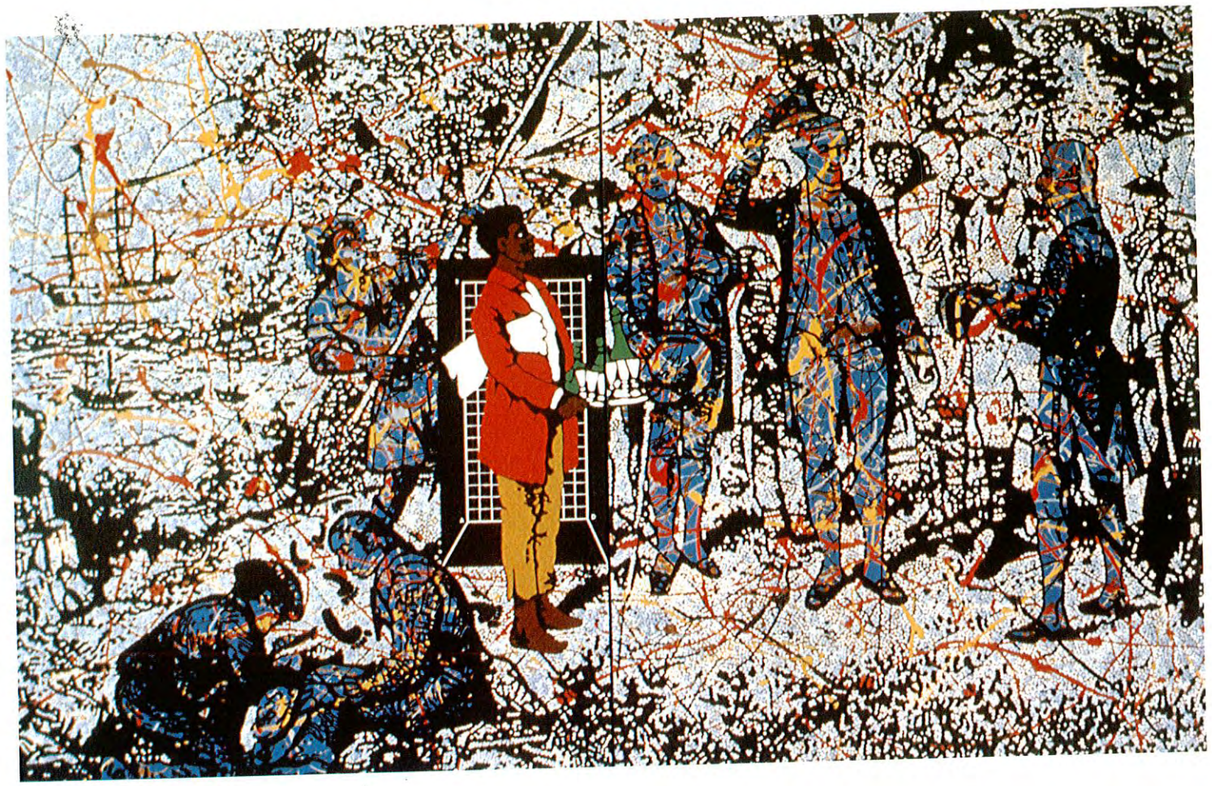
18 For an unfair but entertaining account of the incorporation of theory into art-world discourse as what was cynically termed "Artspeak", see Edward Colless, "The Imaginary Hyper-Mannerist", *Art & Text* n.31, December 1988, or "That's amoré", in Sally Couacoud (curator), *Amoré*, Artspace, Sydney, November 1990. For a short Melbourne article of a distinctly hostile persuasion, see Christopher Heathcote, "Anxiety and after – where are artists heading now?", *The Age*, January 9, 1991, p.12. For an overseas example, see George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Faber & Faber, London, 1989.

19 Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" (trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton), *Art & Text* 11, Spring 1983, pp.3-47. Reprinted in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, pp. 253-281.

JUAN DAVILA: THE PERVERTED CENTRE

Language is a Virus: Cultural Critique

If a virus is a poisonous agent that spreads contagious disease and an influence that leads to corruption, then language is a virus. In the opinion of many critics, Juan Davila produced the most virulent postmodern paintings to emerge from the furious 1980s critique of modernism. Davila's paintings were based on the assumption that visual language could have the power of a virus. Because of his works' sheer intensity, Davila's mapping of art-historical hegemony during the early 1980s constituted a magnetic essay



3:5

on the postmodern themes traced so far. His convictions about artists' moral rights and the importance of their ability to control the publication of their work were answered in the high recognition accorded his work – both elements of this equation are indicated in this book's scarcity of illustrations of Davila's paintings and in its extended commentary on the artist.

Davila's works exemplify the postmodern themes that we have previously noted. These could be summarised as follows: the metropolitan centre's authority had become problematic; the personal self had been shown to be a construction woven from language and discourse; and the difference between private and public life had evaporated (an issue of particular importance in Juan Davila's work). As with Tillers, Davila's primary artistic method was appropriation: he borrowed images from high art, the mass media, science fiction, homosexual pornography and the cultures of Latin America. His painting was virulent because he copied his models with violent intent, corrupting their original meanings. Davila's works were linked to modernism because this idea of copying – as the means of possessing and altering an original so that it could never be seen in the same way again – was common amongst modernist artists such as Picasso in the early 20th century. Both Davila and Tillers were highly conscious of their positions at the margins of world art. Whereas Tillers' politics remained grounded in the discourse of art, Davila's paintings were edged with a hostility and anger produced by the radical politics of his Chilean origins and coloured by his representation of homosexual desire.

These themes appeared in an exaggerated form in Davila's paintings of the early 1980s. In his four-part polyptych, *The Fable of Australian Painting*, 1983, Davila parodied the styles and emblematic motifs of Australia's most celebrated artists, representing Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly masks and Albert Tucker's encrusted bush faces as figures of utter contempt. Nolan's helmeted hero rode off into a luminous Rothko sunset; the panel was split by a Kenneth Noland chevron.[20]

Stupid as a Painter: The Perverse Marriage of Postmodernism and Modernism

In his notorious *Stupid as a Painter*, 1981, Davila quoted typical trademark images of famous international contemporary artists including Roy Lichtenstein's cartoon signs, Valerio Adami's diagrammatic cut-out figures, and Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe face. He montaged these images beside and over each other, combining recent art history with homoerotic cartoon comics, a Manhattan skyscraper background and a running commentary scrawled across the surface of the picture. *Stupid as a Painter* was genuinely confrontational.[21] Its eroticism appeared transgressive because the imagery was determinedly homosexual. This transgression in itself was not particularly shocking, since the delicate tastes of gallery-goers were habituated to the "normal" transgressions of heterosexuality (those, for example, suggested by Brett Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio*). Nor, I think, were viewers as offended by the representation of homosexuality as by its interpolation into the canon of great art. Davila offended because he mocked the ability of the art-lover to adjust to avant-garde languages. These, after all, were reclaimed by ordinary viewers into the acceptable category of great art with surprising semantic agility. Many people believe that art and politics, like sport and politics, should not mix. Davila's crime was to insist on their coexistence; every image was political. And, in fact, his paintings provoked strong reactions: in several years of excursions to galleries with art students, the only official complaint I ever received was the result of a Juan Davila painting.

20 Noland was a protegé of formalist guru Clement Greenberg during the 1960s, when he was acclaimed as a leading Colour Field abstractionist. Many young Australian painters of the time, amongst whom were Sydney Ball, David Aspden and Michael Johnson, had attempted cosmopolitan pastiches of this rather arid style.

21 See Paul Foss and Juan Davila, *The Mutilated Pieta*, Artspace, Sydney, 1985; Paul Carter, "A Blatant Rip-off", *Age Monthly Review* v.5 n.9, Febuary 1986, pp.14-15. Displayed under R-certificate restrictions at the 1982 Sydney Biennale, the painting was seized by the New South Wales Police Vice Squad acting on a complaint from the Reverend Fred Nile, a notoriously conservative Christian fundamentalist. *Stupid as a Painter* was returned to Davila's gallery, Roslyn Oxley9, on NSW Premier Neville Wran's orders after a public outcry, and was finally displayed at Sydney University's Power Institute Gallery.

3:5 Gordon Bennett, *Possession Island*, 1991, oil and acrylic on 2 canvas panels, 162 x 260 cm. Photograph: Xavier Lavictoire. Courtesy Bellas Gallery, Brisbane and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

22 Juan Davila, quoted in Paul Carter, "A Blatant Rip-off", *Age Monthly Review* v.5 n.9, p.14.

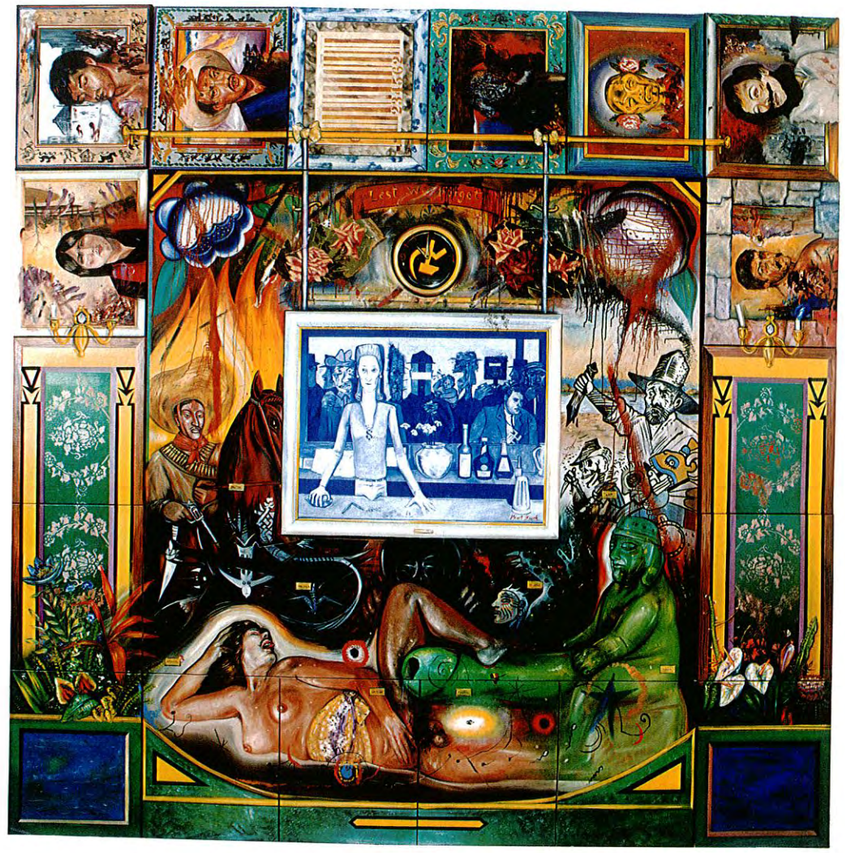
3:6 Juan Davila, *Retablo*, 1989, oil on canvas, 300 x 300 cm. Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

Stupid as a Painter presented a delirium of sexual activity or, to be more precise, a parade of figures posturing in poses of sexual availability and arousal. On the right-hand side panels, a uniformed man lubricated another's anus with an oil-can, whilst his companion was penetrated by the erect penis of a transvestite figure (the Spider Woman, who reappears in several Davila paintings) and threatened by a chain-saw blade. Davila recycled mythic, ambivalent figures from homosexual and heterosexual imagery – the sailor, the biker, Marilyn, the transvestite, the Big Apple – adorning them with identity tags (usually Davila's invented *alter egos*) and gender-twisting details. According to Paul Foss, Davila's paintings imaged perversity because perverse works affronted the sense of self-sufficient identity and completeness by making the violence of the viewer's gaze evident. Diagrammatic lines joined subject's gaze to object's body in many works, just as Davila often marked the figures' eyes with an erasure sign or cross as a token of their inability to return the voyeuristic glance. In *Ratman*, 1980, a man (marked "Davila" in the picture's accompanying style guide) gazed at a woman's crotch. She was painted in the sexist, fetishising style of German Pop artist Richard Lindner; her genitals were marked by another erasure sign.

Davila saw pornography as a disruptive sign language which would facilitate the subversion of mainstream art and its traditions. His apparent aim was to discredit art. Most of his published statements insisted on this subversive role. However, he noted of his painting method that: "It has nothing to do with psychoanalysis; I am concerned with problems specific to art and I operate within these parameters".[22]

The artist's works of the early 1980s, such as *Ratman*, appeared pornographic but were not particularly seductive. As Paul Carter observed, Davila's pictures refused to allow any prolonged sense of identification and enjoyment; they denied the vicarious sense of entering a dream-world. Because he rejected the pleasures of self-forgetfulness and absorption, the viewer was unable to identify completely with his imaginary images. This self-consciousness was forced on the viewer with enormous single-mindedness. The psychology of a distanced, one-dimensional view of identity, exclusively determined by adversarial hostility, reduced characters to ciphers. This deliberately hyper-real psychology was the result of Davila's refusal to make pictures anything less than repulsive, although their crudity did not emerge in reproduction. The pictures truly looked as if they belonged in museums and a decade after they were painted, *Stupid as a Painter* and *Ratman* seemed less and less like aesthetic terrorism.

Stupid as a Painter was an angry painting, desperately articulate in its analysis of the obscene ways in which visual images circulate in heterocentric society. Its anger, however, did not make it effective propaganda nor, for all its virulence, did the picture constitute an effective instrument for social change, even within the narrow coteries frequenting art galleries. The question of avant-garde art's subversive function haunted postmodern art, and particularly that of Davila, for the remainder of the decade. For many academic postmodernists, ideas were merely the material of citation; in the case of Juan Davila, however, the tension between subversive desire and the limits of painting was productive. His art came to seem extraordinarily nostalgic and poignant even if, in reality, the exposed patches of raw canvas looked tatty and the matte colours were alternatively flat, raw, stained or simply muddy. The artist sacrificed any semblance of atmospheric space to achieve the garish immediacy of a comic strip. His pictures exhibited the lack of subtlety typical of paintings in acrylic because Davila contrived the appearance



3:6

of easy, unscholarly, unpretentious cheapness with great care.

Davila's paintings of the early 1980s were representations of taboo images: a bourgeois audience's worst fears of violation were realised through the desecration of its iconic images by figures from gay and marginal mythology. More importantly, his images were allegorical enactments of a critique of modernist art and, in particular, of late-modernist, formalist abstraction. They were an indictment of the great American and European museums and their innocent-seeming, carefully constructed, illusory neutrality. In an essay by Roy Davila (one of Davila's many pseudonyms), the artist observed: "The images that are most effective turn out to be excluded from museums".[23]

23 Roy Davila, "Popular Art", in Juan Davila and Jan Minchin, *Popular Art: Graphic Work 1958-1992*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 1992, unpaginated.

Echo: An Art of the Museums

Davila's images eventually became more seductive and ambiguous, often drenched in light or submerged in shadow. From the mid-1980s, in works such as the monumental, mural-size (274 by 822 centimetres) *Echo*, 1986, Davila created an illusion of intense but bizarre naturalness and free-floating space, akin to the science fiction that his works often cited. As the disorganisation of perception in science fiction enabled the reader to recognise unexpected aspects of the present through images of the future, so Davila's canvas juxtaposed different types of sign, ranging from *trompe l'oeil* framing, diagrams,

abstract marks and words, to iconic symbols such as the swastika. Because his figures were so aggressively and significantly asserted – because they had enormous penises or were juxtaposed with political symbols – they became allegorical, combining the conceptual legitimacy of 20th-century art with the natural power of recognisable objects. Everything was double-coded and everything, because of the increasingly traditional painterly illusionism, appeared familiar, like a bad dream.

Although many critics spoke of such works as subversive exposés, I think that their quality lay more in their ability to conjure up ghosts. Davila's work of this period, including *Echo*, should thus be linked with contemporaneous works by Anselm Kiefer, for example *Shulamite*, 1983. Both artists recognised that the power of art to alter and disrupt society was neutralised by incorporation in museums. Both created paintings that were only really suited to museum display. Juan Davila's pictures, if they were to be taken as anything more than simple-minded protests, depended upon a knowledgeable viewer's appreciation of the disjunction between word and image or between rhetoric and intention.[24] *Echo* recreated the aesthetic lure of semi-Fascist delirium and forced the viewer to contemplate his or her own complicity in what he or she would ordinarily condemn. Davila's simulations of other artists' work and depictions of 20th-century history looked like a public execution; many of his paintings featured scenes of desecration, rape and violence, referring to government repression in Chile.

Davila demonstrated two tendencies: the perverse stylistic marriage of postmodernism and modernism; and the violent disfiguring of abstraction, seen in the obliteration of distinctions between figurative and non-figurative motifs within the space of science fiction. For Davila, the margins became more than Other and more than an image of the heart of darkness. His achievement was to create an art of the museums (to borrow Cézanne's phrase) outside the mythologies and dependencies of European and American centres. Although Davila cannibalised the body of art, his paintings did not show art consumed by desire, but desire consumed by art.

By the end of the decade, Davila's pictures became the enactment of filmic postcolonial narratives about sexual desire and punishment, populated by characters from Latin American cultural mythology and caricatures of personalities from the Australian art world. These developments will be explored in Chapter 6.

Commentary on Davila, like that on Tillers, was flawed by its fixation on his appropriative method. His appropriation should have been distinguished from quotation and more accurately described as citation. In his paintings, sexual fantasy appeared as permanent reality – the way the world would be if it was ordered like William Burroughs' apocalyptic narratives. The setting for Davila's fantasies was the artist's studio and sex was the centre of its universe. The studio was the locus of culture, as in Courbet's famous painting, and stood in for (even contained) all of culture. Despite his rhetorical populism, viewing Davila's paintings was like being admitted to a very select club and then wondering what all the famous people were really like. The answer, of course, was that personages on museum walls have no character of their own at all; Davila's corruption of meaning was a particularly bleak and ruthless form of truth-telling.

24 The process is elegantly described in Andreas Huyssen's *October* essay on the German artist's notoriety and his indebtedness to the art of the 1960s and 1970s: Kiefer is a post-Conceptual artist. See Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: the Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth", *October* n. 48, Spring 1989, pp. 25-46.