Chapter 6

Postcolonial Art and Peripheral Vision

POSTCOLONIAL ART AND PERIPHERAL VISION

The End of the World: A Postcolonial Perspective

Australia is a postcolonial nation and is, therefore, neither an enclave of the great metropolitan centres of world culture in North America and Europe nor even a remote branch office. Australia is not, contrary to the conservative fantasies of royalists, an island floating off the coast of Europe. Although its population is relatively small (a number comparable to Holland), it is an industrialised, highly urbanised, and comparatively wealthy nation. Sydney and Melbourne, for example, are both more and less metropolitan than European cities such as Brussels or Manchester: they are larger, with the vibrancy and extensive cultural infrastructure accompanying dense concentrations of three or four million people from wildly diverse ethnic origins.

Australian artists are, for better or worse, postcolonial artists whether they belong to indigenous peoples or are immigrants and their descendants: the majority of Australians, like Canadians and Chileans, belong to the second category. The political and historical fact of colonisation, most obviously by Britain, makes Australians postcolonial: Australians have inherited political and social systems designed somewhere else; they inhabit an economic system designed to benefit someone else.

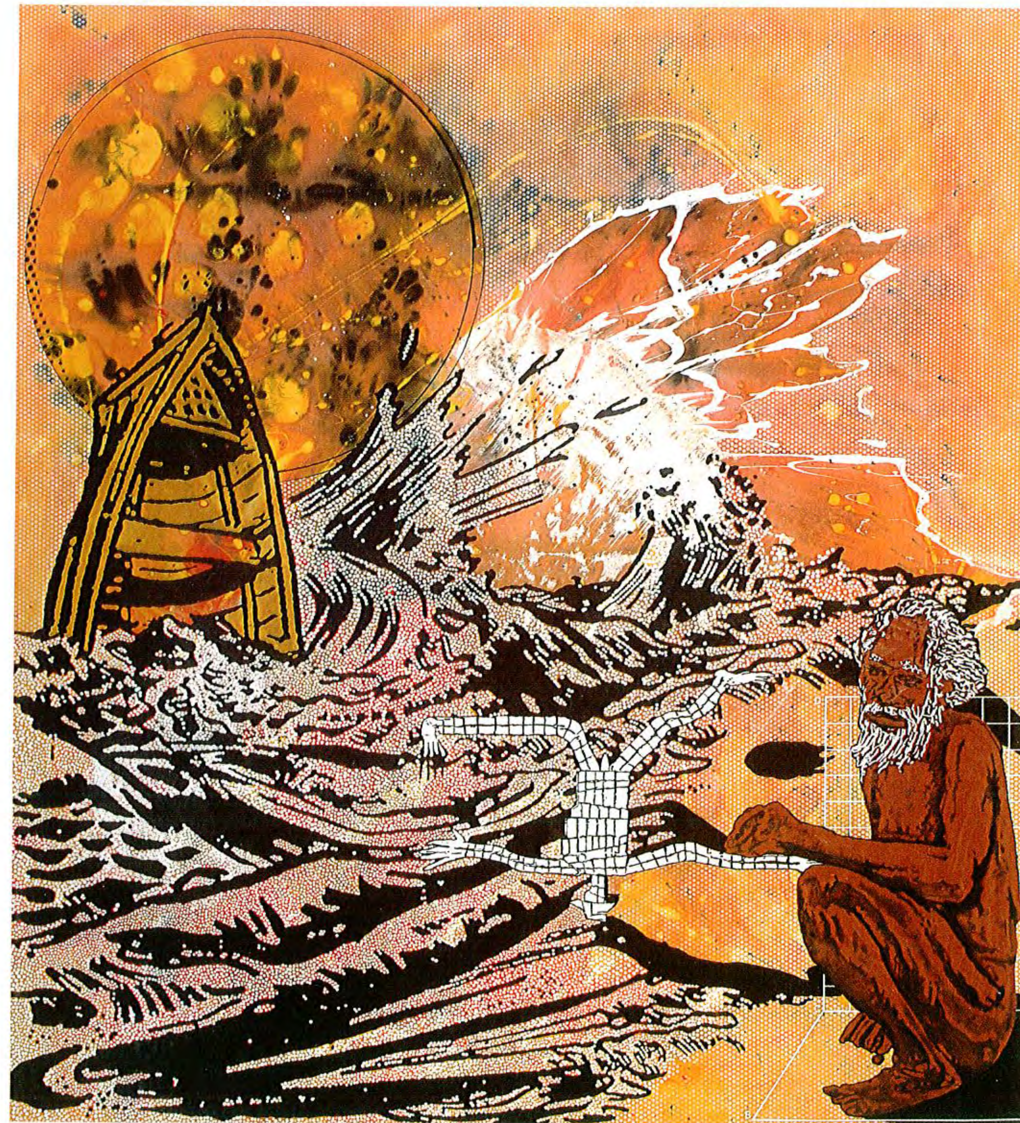
Postcolonialism itself is a disputed term and, as is often the case with theory in art, can be mobilised to support severely different opinions. The term can signify either the consequences and aftermath of colonisation, or can simply refer to the period in which colonisation has been left behind upon the attainment of political independence. The latter usage is a far less confrontational definition, leading a number of Aboriginal artists and writers to take issue with the "post-colonial" model.

The previous chapters described how, due to the impact of postmodern thought over the last two decades, identity came to be regarded, by many artists and thinkers, as a social and political construct. Despite the obliteration of old subjectivities, the idea of possessing an "identity" survived in unexpected forms. There were two ways in which identity was now conceived: firstly, the earlier conception of an individual's "essential" character still lingered; secondly, the idea of a socially constructed self formed as much by stereotypes (of class, nationality, gender, age, education, health status and race) as by individual character and personal experience became orthodox. To an earlier generation of feminist artists, for example, identity was principally a function of gender. Assertions of national identity were found in the conservative and usually hagiographic writing surrounding older artists including Arthur Boyd and Russell Drysdale; these descriptions of "Australian" identity usually involved the desert, the outback and the artist-hero. Such definitions were far from accurate, and many of the images with which Australians framed themselves – as a nation of big, bronzed, sun-worshipping, sports-loving men – were biased towards the perpetuation of unequal relationships of sex, class and race; those surf life-savers weren't born bronzed. These definitions, in turn, mirrored international inequalities such as that between the periphery and the centre.

To many postmodern artists, however, identity occurred in cultural and social transactions and was signalled in the activity of consumption – in buying brand-name goods and Madonna books. From the late 1980s on, the processes through which cultural identity was formed became an important issue to many artists, and the facts of location – geographic, historical and national – became the means through which apparently

Previous page: detail from **6:6**

6:1 Gordon Bennett, *Aborigine Painting (The Inland Sea)*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 216 x 197 cm. Photograph: Kenneth Pleban. Courtesy Bellas Gallery, Brisbane and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.



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self-evident ideas about culture were examined. Hybridisation and mimicry appeared consistently in the culture of many postcolonial societies.

The erosion of the triple dogmas of modernism, modernity and avant-gardism in the 1980s coincided not only with the emergence of postmodernism but with the realisation that there were increasing complexities of "Otherness" and therefore different types of subjectivity – those of gender and sexuality, race and class, geographic location and dislocations – which were overdue for re-examination. Art communities, especially those of the great metropolitan centres, were increasingly aware that non-European cultures could no longer be understood through conquest, appropriation or blunt domination.

The artists whose work is mentioned in this chapter, including Narelle Jubelin, Tim Johnson, Juan Davila and Tracey Moffatt, reflected upon their location and mimicked, or even perverted, the international postmodern culture of the world's main centres. For most, but not all, of these artists, difference was a source of interaction and not of friction.[1] Postcolonial status was both a perspective and a position, imposed by geography and history, with different effects on non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal artists.

Postcolonial perspectives, which became crucially important during the early 1990s,

1 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Biennale symposium, "A Matter of Timing", Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, March 13, 1993, author's notes.

suggested that modernism was a culturally conditioned construction. Translated to an Australian (or a similar but Third World) environment, modernism and postmodernism *per se* carried no necessary element of the avant-garde crisis which drove modern art in Europe and America from the middle decades of this century onwards.

THE ARBITRARY CENTRE: PROVINCIALISM, REGIONALISM, "WORLD ART"

Provincialism: The Conditions and Status of Australian Art

The dominant and arbitrary power of Western culture makes us blind; it assumes the image and function of an absolutely convincing organised global market. This network of ideas and information is transmitted and organised by the world's technologically dominant economies and constitutes the real contemporary world metropolis.[2]

2 Raymond Williams, "Metropolitan Perceptions" [1985], reprinted in his *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 38.

There are several persistent reasons for the blindness caused by modernity, which invariably refuse to take into account the hybrid condition and status of Australian art. According to Raymond Williams, the first reason for the continuing power and prestige of the avant-garde paradigm and the central metropolis was the ongoing privilege accorded to older cultural forms like those of modernism: cultural authority allowed the centre to arbitrate meaning and value. The phantom metropolis was constituted by prestigious magazines, publishing houses and intellectual institutions, which still exercised vast authority. Legitimacy was determined by the institutional and academic networks located in North America and Europe.

Awareness that the authority of these arbiters was merely relative could illuminate the messages received by those beyond. For example, subscribers to international art magazines usually subscribed in order to find out what was happening in the world of contemporary art. Magazine editors simultaneously constructed a careful impression, through subtle juxtaposition, editorial commentary and layout, that the art they featured was the most newsworthy. The metropolitan cultural centres of the West largely preserved their cultural power and remained immune from the so-called challenges and subversions of art from the periphery. It was unlikely that metaphors outside those of the metropolis could suffice to image power and authority. The metaphors of the world's large art centres were of shallowness and artificiality, epitomised in the supremely self-conscious sexual consumerism of Jeff Koons and the worldly hauteur of Australian photographer Bill Henson, whose work was described in the last chapter. It was equally unlikely that art outside postmodernity and its metropolitan centres of origin could effectively intervene, either literally or metaphorically, in the international discourse of magazines, museums, art fairs and curated shows.

Whatever the desirable attributes of provinces, wilderness or the utterly Other, they were invariably imaged as powerless, even if mysterious and life-affirming.[3] The metropolis was culturally dominant in both metaphors and museums. The relationship between the main centres of Western culture and Australia was limited and fairly straightforward: the colony occasionally provided "raw materials" (including works by regional artists) for theorisation. This image correctly suggests the appropriation of terms from the domain of politics, highlighting the fact that analogous forms of domination are practised within cultural, political and economic spheres. During the 1980s metropolitan postmodernism exercised a benevolent and usually uncontested cultural hegemony in ex-colonial societies like Australia.

3 See the essays, choice of artists, and artists' statements in Jean-Hubert Martin (curator), *Magiciens de la Terre*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989.

The modernist dogmas governing early-20th century culture continued to seem absolutely permanent. Amongst these dogmas, as Williams noted, were the often encountered definitions of the subject as a self-conscious, self-reflexive inmate of the prison-house of language. Metropolitan centres and their avant-gardes saw their own processes as universal. Within the complexity and openness of the modernist metropolis, there was no formed, settled society to mediate or assimilate new art. The metropolis, even now, exists in different stages in different cities.

As commodities of monetary and cultural value, art works established their importance through evaluation, which usually took place with reference to the values and hierarchies of the main metropolitan centres of art: at the large museums and contemporary galleries, in magazines, at artists' studios, and through the reflections of these institutions at the periphery. From all these diverse places, Western culture magnanimously recycled the previously subversive marginality of peripheral cultures in order to preserve its own sovereign position.

This was understood through an international debate to which Australians contributed, both through the adoption (and co-option) of Aboriginal art, and in the participation of Australian artists and theorists. The artists, writers and galleries who form the subject of this chapter were active contributors to these debates, while also being objects of study. Many postcolonial theorists, including Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha, lectured in Australia, just as Australian writers and artists such as Meaghan Morris and Tracey Moffat contributed to important publications and appeared at major international events.

The metropolitan centres of America and Europe even made a fetish of national difference in order to erase its presence.[4] In a 1989 symposium on "The Global Issue" for the American art magazine *Art in America*, U.S. critic Craig Owens noted a need to distinguish between the benevolent Third Worldism of contemporary metropolitan culture – the sudden, predictable interest of curators, critics and artists in cultural products such as Aboriginal painting – and the more indigestible, rigorous inquiries into national representation by postcolonial intellectuals such as Edward Said, Spivak and Homi Bhabha.[5] A confusion between the two approaches – Third Worldism and postcolonialism – produced art and theory that once again privileged the point of view of colonising Europeans. White artists' sentimental empathy for Aboriginal culture, for example, allowed them to once again appropriate their cultural terrain.[6]

Postcolonial thinkers also criticised postmodernism because, by the early 1990s, postmodernism had become, in Australia and overseas, another powerful, conservative institution. The attractiveness of postcolonial thought in art circles was in no small part due to the openings created by other marginal subcultures, such as those of feminism and gay culture during the 1980s, which were both critical in the formation of postmodern theory. Similarly, the description of the present as hyper-real by postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard was only partially correct because that experience occurred differently from one part of the globe to another, and differently in Australia to the United States. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued that postmodernism presented itself as neutral, perspectiveless and universally valid, whereas it was in fact unable to accommodate autonomous terms outside its own frame of reference.[7] This argument, in turn, became something of a postmodern and postcolonial orthodoxy in the early 1990s, and was demonstrated in the ambivalent reception of Imants Tillers' Aboriginal appropriations,

4 When, as Simon During noted, an exhibition of Maori art from New Zealand, "Te Maori", toured the United States in the mid-1980s, Mobil Oil was its main sponsor. Mobil hoped to sign several large contracts with the New Zealand Government. A question arose: should Maori spiritual leaders allow particularly sacred but artistically significant treasures to tour? Allowing them to leave the country was to assent to their decontextualisation. Whereas some postmodern theorists, for example American anthropologist James Clifford, argue in such cases that this is inevitable, others felt here that pre-colonial culture could not be torn free of its context without further disruption, loss of tradition and destruction of still intact spiritual traditions. Eventually, the Maori community allowed the art works to travel and they were submerged as the background of the postmodern museum experience. Carol O'Biso, the show's U. S. curator, described one occasion where the museum lights mysteriously went out – the "King Tut" phenomenon – when sacred objects were photographed. She immediately incorporated the incident into the show's pre-publicity, demonstrating a contemporary museum curator's indomitable ability to absorb and profit from the supernatural. See Simon During, "Waiting for the Post: Some Relations between Modernity, Colonisation and Writing", in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *Past the Last Post: Theorising post-colonialism and post-modernism*, Hemel Hampstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 36-37.

5 Craig Owens, interview in "The Global Issue: A Symposium", *Art in America* v.77 n.7, July 1989, p. 7.

6 Homi Bhabha suggested that the deconstructive analysis of postmodernism served to reinscribe the conceptual boundaries of the West on the colonial periphery. See Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Discrimination and the discourse of Colonialism" [1983], in Marcia Tucker (ed.), *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p. 71.

7 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

The Nine Shots, 1991, which were themselves unforgettably appropriated by Queensland artist Gordon Bennett.

"World Art": The 1992 Biennale of Sydney

The themes of postcolonialism and Australia's geographical location within the Asian region recurred throughout the 1990s as Australian artists developed new cultural links in response to the hybrid present. Whilst Australians' backgrounds were diverse, their sympathies lay with the West; along with most people in developed nations, they were informed and entertained by a media whose orientation was that of the major Western metropolitan centres. In the face of prosperity as fulsome as it was fragile, Australians were nonetheless members of a postcolonial society in transition. The 1992 Sydney Biennale appropriately took as its theme "The Boundary Rider": Australia sat on the fence, straddling the boundary between the major metropolitan societies of the north and the rest of the world, marginal to the concerns of each. The following year's 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial, at Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery, attracted enormous interest and enthusiasm from the Australian arts community, testifying to Australian artists' and art bureaucrats' awareness of changing times.

For the American and European art worlds, however, Australia remained part of an intriguing, postcolonial, postmodern scenography which included world music, Japanese television advertising and Pacific Rim cuisine. Australian artists seemed to create exotic signs that testified to the mixing of cultures, proving that the mainstream accommodated diversity according to a benign multicultural cliché. Accordingly, Hispanic-American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who toured Australia during the 1992 Sydney Biennale, referred constantly to "cultimulturalism". Well-meaning official clichés of pluralism always worked to diminish cultural conflict resulting from changes, just as the cultural Other was invariably stereotyped and recolonised. The world beyond the big cities of Europe and America was seen as undeveloped, primitive and a source of raw materials; the West was fascinated by both "the Orient" and "the primitive", which it found highly erotic and a source of aesthetic ideas.

Western intellectuals traditionally assumed that they spoke from the cutting edge of an ostensibly global culture – and thus on behalf of all the less developed peoples of nations at the periphery, since these margins existed as impure copies of the centre. International art journal commentaries on Australia often featured a lurid nostalgia for ghostly fantasies of wildness and spirituality; the centre fetishised difference in order to efficiently and unobtrusively manage its erasure. Of course, Australian culture did the same to Aboriginal societies, duplicating, at the periphery, all the centre's duplicity and self-absorption. This misdemeanour, however, did not mean that white Australian artists were able to qualify for full membership of the centre. It meant, as Vietnamese/American theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha observed, that there was a First World in every Third World, and a Third World in every First World.[8]

Such was the background behind the Biennales of Sydney. The 1992 Biennale was held at the cavernous old Bond Stores 3 and 4, and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Its Director, Tony Bond, wrote:

> In recent thinking the idea of a cultural avant-garde as an arrow pointing down a single "progressive" path towards the future has been replaced by theories of borders where conceptual

8 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "A Matter of Timing", author's notes.

6:2 Coco Fusco & Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney*, 1992, performance, Australian Museum, Sydney. Photograph: Carl Bento. Courtesy Australian Museum.

> territories must constantly be negotiated as they shift and expand, intersecting with diverse other territories. The questioning of limits and our ability to change them becomes a more complex and infinitely more flexible process. In recognition of this change and its obvious implications for a multicultural project, I rejected the quest for universalising tendencies.[9]

9 Anthony Bond, "Notes on the Catalogue and Exhibition", in Anthony Bond (curator), *The Boundary Rider: 9th Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992, p. 15.

The Biennales were, from their inception in the 1970s, Australia's major exhibitions of international contemporary art. They were perhaps the only event in contemporary Australian art attracting considerable overseas media attention, because scores of international artists were brought to Australia to exhibit next to local artists. Over 112 artists were selected for the 1992 exhibition, of whom 84 travelled to Sydney from overseas.

Colonised space had always informed the centre: thus, both modernism and postmodernism could be rewritten with colonial and postcolonial genealogies. In fact, cultural borders between periphery and centre were always porous and their negotiation more complicated than imagined by museums of modern art. An examination of borders – of conditions at the edges of culture, politics and science – was clearly timely, given the dubious credibility of cultural convergence.

The 1992 Biennale of Sydney, the ninth such event, indexed the strategies of postcolonial art: *bricolage*, mimicry and hybridisation. Biennale Director Tony Bond focused on art about boundaries and transgression, locating recombinative *bricolage* as crucial to Border art. Latin American artist Romero de Andrede Lima constructed androgynous cult figures from composite parts. From New York, Orshi Drozdik's installation, *Cynical Reason I*, 1992, combined medical props and theories of cultural control in a literalisation of the gendered subject's borders. Italian artist Guilio Paolini's installation of chairs and canvas, *L'Ospite*, 1992, elegantly constructed the illusion of reflected space seen in negative, highlighting *Arte Povera*'s affinity with the art of the margins; British artist Melanie Counsell's glassed-off warehouse space defined borders as the almost imperceptible framing edges of art. For such metropolitan artists, as for Paolini, the border represented an aspect of Duchampian tradition.

The concept underlying most of the work in the 1992 Biennale was the *bricoleur*, a concept borrowed from the structuralism of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. A *bricoleur* is an odd-job man who makes do with whatever materials come to hand, and repairs or devises new tools from junk and scraps. Bond decided that "*bricolage* has proved the most successful strategy for disrupting the linearity of cultural hegemony".[10] Whether or not it actually did so was open to discussion; the Biennale met with very mixed reviews. It had inadvertently marked the probable demise of installation as the means for artists to dismantle or rewrite fixed ideas of identity, because sanctimonious conformity and political correctness often smothered the Bond Store's vast space, just as they asphyxiated the 1993 New York Whitney Biennale. The illustration of social activist sentiment invariably produced sentimentality.

10 Anthony Bond, "Notes", in Anthony Bond (curator), *The Boundary Rider: 9th Biennale of Sydney*, p. 15.

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Fiction and deliberate misinterpretation emerged instead as the most challenging aspect of contemporary border art: Narelle Jubelin's *Dead Slow*, 1991, and Coco Fusco & Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney*, 1992, reworked the idea of borders through metaphors of intercultural mobility. Jubelin recorded the links between Bombay, Scotland and Australia, tracing the intertextuality of sewing manuals and translating these sources into painstaking *petit-point* tapestry. At the Australian Museum, Fusco & Gómez-Peña exhibited themselves as ostensibly caged Amerindian

savages from a recently discovered island in the Gulf of Mexico. As a re-enactment of the scandal that greeted the discovery of New World cultures in 1492, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney*, resonated with a different set of associations in Australia: awareness of comparatively recent trade in deceased Aboriginal bones intersected with an affront to, using Gómez-Peña's term, contemporary "cultimulturalism".

Installation, *bricolage* and the readymade have a long tradition as "survival practices" in peripheral societies. Ashley Bickerton's *Seascape: Floating costume to drift for eternity*, 1991, alluded to these functions; it was a simulation of a lifeboat assembled from fibreglass, webbing, glass and an embalmed Christian Dior suit. In an interview during the Biennale, Bickerton commented:

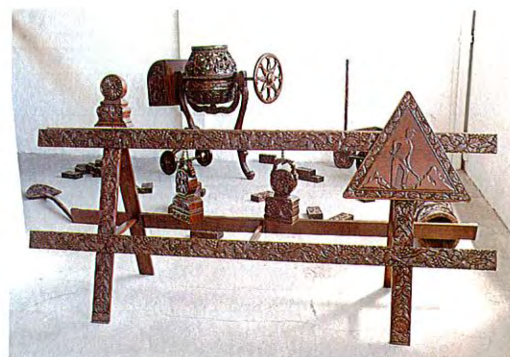
> It is a Dior suit. It is the suit of light that one puts on to interact with business, power and politics ... To represent a certain Western idea. It is an international symbol that floats around the world endlessly, like the Flying Dutchman.[11]

11 Ashley Bickerton, in unpublished interview with Peter Hill, Sydney, December 1992.

12 Wim Delvoye, in unpublished interview with Peter Hill, Sydney, December 1992.

Wim Delvoye's *Labour of Love*, 1992, continued the artist's displacement of Flemish decorative tradition. In an allusion to Dutch East Indian colonial furniture, Delvoye hired traditional Indonesian craftsmen to carve road-works equipment – a heavily ornamented wooden cement-mixer, shovels and road barriers. The artist commented that:

> The connection is quite strange. The Indonesians imported a certain kind of 17th century Baroque wood carving from the Dutch. I have now employed them to carve a life-size concrete mixer from teak, so in a way I am taking back to the West what was already given to them three centuries ago. Prior to the Dutch influence, Indonesian wood carving had been quite superficial in terms of surface treatment ... In my piece here, although it is still wood carving, it becomes a concrete mixer and traffic barrier.[12]



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6:3-4 Wim Delvoye, *Labour of Love*, 1992, installation comprising carved and ornamented simulations in wood of road works equipment including cement-mixer, shovels and road barriers (all items carved by Indonesian craftsmen), 9th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist.

Like Narelle Jubelin, Delvoye examined the complex networks of global trade. Lush embellishment re-enacted postcolonial economic relations, through deliberately emphasised exploitation of the European colonial past; art represented the fantastic over-expenditure of an Other's labour.

In an impressively manipulative, expressively eclectic critique of museum spectacle, Fusco & Gómez-Peña addressed the instability of the identities conferred upon them as Hispanic Americans. Like Delvoye's *Labour of Love*, the deliberate outcome of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney* was cultural-border kitsch in which straightforward complicity was avoided. In other performances during the Biennale, Gómez-Peña simultaneously legitimised and overturned the exhibition's thematic authenticity through urgent, apocalyptic monologues – forecasts of end-of-century global nomadism. Similarly, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney*'s savages, imprisoned in their large golden cage, owned hi-tech joggers, supermarket kitchenware, lap-top computers and exotic native headgear. The native Americans' availability for photography and media representation coincided with their exploitation of the audience.

Delvoye and Fusco & Gómez-Peña rewrote traditional ideas of artistic authenticity through a deliberate Border art, arguing, in effect, for the colonisation and perversion of the mainstream through the appropriation of both modernity and postmodernity by artists at the periphery. This was the direction taken from the late 1980s onwards by many of the Australian artists who exhibited at the Bond Stores.

POSTCOLONIAL REGIONALISM: CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART

Celebrity and Commodity

Celebrity transfigures its object. The overwhelming spectacle and commodification of art returned the aura that theorist Walter Benjamin so unkindly removed. It gave Australian Aboriginal painting, from the mid-1980s onwards, a special radiance. Since commodification was a particularly contemporary way of Dreaming, and the contemporary imagination was acquisitive, art audiences were able to witness a cultural convergence of sorts. At the utopian end of the Cold War, when free markets were installed across the globe, the majority of black Australians still lived in conditions as desperate as any urban ghetto.

One sceptical opinion held that Western Desert artists forfeited their identity by participation in white culture. These commentators doubted that the art boom led to much-needed social improvements; attention was assumed to represent a marketing strategy stage-managed by non-Aboriginal connoisseurs and bureaucrats.[13]

However, Aboriginal artists remained particularly resistant to contemporary theory's counsel on correct decorum. They were not nearly as passive as the above account suggested, and Western Desert painters used a market for their work as a way of retrieving cultural power, through influencing an audience that became both international and local. In areas like Australia's Red Centre, ceremonial activity and artistic production flourished against enormous odds. There was some evidence of artistic and financial exploitation, but it was neither significant nor widespread. There were by 1990 about six thousand Aboriginal painters of whom a quarter earned more than $1000 in a year.[14] The prices paid for Aboriginal artists' work remained significantly lower, however, than those received by their non-Aboriginal peers.

Painter Michael Nelson Tjakamarra once said: "It's time for us to teach white people about our culture through our paintings. They probably will learn somehow. It's going to take a long time." Success in American and European galleries carried enormous weight in Australia, and Aboriginal people were intensely aware of the prestige their art generated through exhibitions like "Dreamings", in New York's prestigious Asia Society Galleries during 1988.

When German car manufacturer BMW commissioned Tjakamarra to paint one of its Art Cars (participating artists had included Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein) the contract specified that a design be executed in "an identifiably Aboriginal style".[15] The same deeply-held Western sentiments about good value in cars also conditioned responses to art – a preference for reliability, design complexity and, above all, exclusivity. The impact of Australian Aboriginal painting in the arena of contemporary art had, therefore, little connection with intellectual discourse. It was more a case of Western metropolitan culture – the culture of New York and Europe – redefining itself against its own centrality, turning relations to the world's periphery inside-out with the most fastidious propriety.

Leah King-Smith, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett: "Who do you take me for?"

Many Aboriginal artists, especially those working in urban centres such as Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, did not work in variations of traditional artistic idioms at all: Leah King-Smith's photographs were montages of Aboriginal faces drawn from old photo-

13 This view is forcefully if inaccurately put in Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, "Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?", *Art in America* v.77 n.7, July 1989, pp. 159-161. A more lucid and convincing account is found in Roger Benjamin's "Aboriginal Art: Exploitation or Empowerment?", *Art in America* v.78 n.7, July 1990, pp. 73-81.

14 Alan Attwood, "Black Art Breaks into a White World", *Time Australia*, July 16, 1990, p. 61.

15 See Vivien Johnson, "Running Trees", *Tension* n.17, August 1989, pp. 52-55. Johnson is one of the most articulate writers on Aboriginal art.

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graphic archives dissolving into Edenic landscapes of trees and water in large cibachrome double exposures. King-Smith's images refracted two iconographies – those of anger (the photographs were patched together from a particular moment of colonial history marked by white malevolence) and the uncanny (they were percolated through the psychedelic undercurrent of much contemporary urban Aboriginal art). Their curving, spiritualised space was capacious, spooky and permeable: the fish-eye viewpoints enclosed an enormous field of vision and blurred the boundaries between objects and people. Gordon Bennett painted hybrid, angry appropriations of contemporary postmodernism and rejected easy labels, including that of "urban Aboriginal artist". According to Bennett, "The problem with that terminology is that you become a professional Aborigine instead of a professional artist who is an Aborigine".[16] Other black Australian artists, for example photographer and film-maker Tracey Moffatt, were highly ambivalent about being bracketed as "artists of colour". The photographs in Moffatt's series, *Something More*, 1989, were moments in a carefully staged enactment of a multi-ethnic, ambiguous sexual narrative involving symbolically loaded images of motorcycles, boots, whips and at least two interwoven love stories. Moffatt carefully rejected all simplicistic categorisations:

> I have never been a mere social issues type artist, in fact my work has never been BLACK. (If there is such a definition). I have made a point of staying out of all black or "other" shows (except once, years ago, my work wasn't even well-known but even then I felt it was a step backwards in my career). I want to be exhibited in Contemporary Art Spaces and not necessarily always bunched together with other artists who make careers out of "finding themselves – looking for their identities"!
> The reason why I have been successful is that I have avoided allowing myself to be ghettoised as a BLACK ARTIST.[17]

16 Gordon Bennett, quoted in Joyce Morgan, "Visions of a Black Heart", *The Australian*, July 6, 1994, p. 16.

17 Tracey Moffatt, quoted from an exchange of letters between Moffatt and curator Clare Williamson, in Tracey Moffatt and Clare Williamson, "Exchange of letters: 'Who do you take me for?'", *Eyeline* n.18, Autumn 1992, p. 5. Also printed in Clare Williamson, "Who do you take me for?", in *Who do you take me for?*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, March 1992, pp. 3-4.

6:5 Leah King-Smith, *Untitled (#5)* from the Patterns of Connection series, 1991, cibachrome photograph, 102 x 102 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.

6:6 Leah King-Smith, *Untitled (#11)* from the Patterns of Connection series, 1991, cibachrome photograph, 102 x 102 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne.

6:7 Clifford Possum Japaljarri, *Women's Ceremonies at the Site of Illera*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 94 x 127 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne and Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney.

Western Desert Painting: The Business of Art

Western audiences were typically romantic in their assumptions that grand themes and distinctively "authentic" messages lay behind every Aboriginal subject. Over the 25 years since a white school teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, provided a group of old men in Australia's desert centre with acrylic paint, Western Desert artists have sought exactly the opposite, trying to conceal great dramas and avoid their disclosure. The moment that produced the earliest acrylic paintings is unrecoverable but its importance could be sensed from the urgency with which linoleum, old fruit tins and fragments of masonry – any material at hand – were covered. From that time on, the art produced in these communities changed at a rate faster than simple Western models of ethnocidal domination allowed. Aboriginal painters actively sought to enter the institutions of art. The first Aboriginal paintings constituted a crisis: portable representations of sacred images circulating outside the control of responsible initiates. A process of editing out these secrets obviously commenced, and thus what was seen was regarded as not worth hiding. Imants Tillers, amongst white Australian artists, understood and wrote about these issues from the early 1980s, in part because his own painting had been a portrait of a Western culture in which there were no longer any secrets worth keeping.[18] It was necessary to understand the hermetic nature of Aboriginal society. As one anthropologist, Richard Kimber, observed, there was a "fantastic amount of secrecy" involved in the continuous initiatory religious activity of Western Desert communities.[19] Apart from de-tribalised Aboriginal groups, according to other observers, "Aboriginal people have no atheists, no agnostics. Each Aboriginal person is a true believer in their own religious culture."[20]

18 Imants Tillers, "Locality Fails", *Art & Text* n.6, Winter 1982, pp. 51-60.

19 Richard Kimber, quoted in Max Charlesworth (ed.), *Ancestor Spirits*, Deakin University Press, Geelong, 1990, p. 40.

20 Noel Wallace, in Max Charlesworth (ed.), *Ancestor Spirits*, p. 62.

21 Eric Michaels, "Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics", in *Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989, p. 32.

An irresistibly postmodern script: Fourth World artists raced against their own success to edit out the last traces of mystic meaning, whilst embracing with media-smart subtlety the business of art. The same men – and women – created in the process science fiction spaces so vacant yet loaded that the slightest inflections suggested meaningful infinitude. The more that Western Desert artists worked to eliminate the traces of tribal secrets that earlier slipped past their self-censorship, the more recognisable that transcendent absence became. Foreign audiences expected Aboriginal artists to create paintings as close as possible to traditional culture, but the desire of Aboriginal culture was, apparently, for the artists to avoid those truths. One result was the proliferation of infill dots and repetitive marks that dominated many paintings and separated precise motifs. Anthropologist Eric Michaels suggested that "current Aboriginal paintings be confronted directly as products of explicitly contemporary manufacture".[21] This was exactly how they were intended: Western Desert acrylic painting did not exist before 1971. Traditional relationships, between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*, or Dreaming-owner and Dreaming-guardian, were indispensable to the correct censorship and transmission of secret motifs; these were now complicated by the production and proliferation of art. The earliest examples of Desert painting were far less carefully interrogated for traces of sacred-secret knowledge than more recent examples. Whilst relatively few women in the Papunya community painted initially, at Yuendumu a large proportion of artists were women and they utilised the phenomenon of art to improve their status and community facilities. Some artists exhibited a greater facility and continuing commitment to painting. The initial waves of enthusiasm in Aboriginal communities were tempered by changes that the production of art for commercial circulation induced.

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How, then, were these paintings to be regarded, and how much would outsiders be

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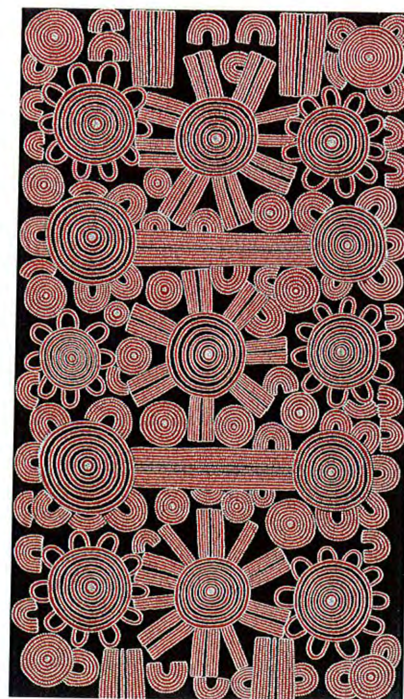
22 Mudrooroo Narogin, quoted in Robert Rooney, "Dreaming by Design", *The Australian*, July 22, 1989, "Weekend" section p. 16.

23 Alan Attwood, "Black Art", *Time Australia*, July 16, 1990, p. 57.



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allowed to know about ritual functions? How was curiosity to be balanced with respect? The painters should have been taken at their word, and acknowledged to be as much in control of the circulation and meaning of their paintings as any other artist. Aboriginal commentator Mudrooroo Narogin suggested that while "stress is laid on the fact that one needs to know the story behind the painting to be able to appreciate it ... I deny that this is necessary."[22] Since one could make little real sense of the landscape's topography from a literal attempt to identify geography with painted marks, there was still a tendency to gauge these works by romantic allegorical yardsticks. As the art dealer in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, a novel about Western Desert Aboriginal communities and anthropologists, declared: "I can't sell a picture without a story".

Donkeyman Lee Tjupurrula's painting, *Yata Yata/Tjarinpa, West of Lake Mackay*, 1990, satisfied this curiosity through an excess of information since a place – in desert terms – was where a lot of things pass through. Every element the artist included was there for a purpose – to confer upon a particular composition a narrative authority and to hide its presence. Complaints about the trivialisation of traditional culture may have therefore missed the point. On the one hand, this painting purported to be a panoramic view, like a map, of the region west of Lake Mackay. In this picture there was in fact a fairly coherent illusion of the representation of a place: meandering lines suggested a creek; dazzling line patterns implied salt-lakes. Tjupurrula's formal brilliance – seen in the interlocking patterns and asymmetrical dynamic – concealed the rupturing of one representational code by another. The black diagonal made by the Marpurri snake, and two arcs, symbolising mythical men, beside the roundel at the corner of the painting, comprised descriptions of altogether different types. On the other hand, in paintings, such as Dave Perle Ross's *Arunbunga's Star Flight*, 1991, all ability to decode the images as maps was defeated by emblematic, almost self-parodic, frontality and the juxtaposition of contrary perspectives. Firstly, the now familiar signs of an aerial view were observed; secondly, the artist interpolated a diagrammatic depiction of body paint and head-dresses for ritual performers. The *knowing* character of these pictures was seen even more clearly in Fred Ward Tjungurrayi's *Three Snake Dreaming towards Karrilwarra*, 1989. It was manifest in the superimposition of schematic snakes – as if drawn from a comic – across a more recognisably "Aboriginal" geometric diagram. Such intrusions appeared in many Aboriginal Desert paintings, for example as the magisterial skeleton in Tim Leura Japaljarri's famous *Possum Spirit Dreaming*, 1980.

Western cultural discernment remains one of its crucial myths. For better or worse, the West's activities as the Other's gatekeeper could be traced via the mediating influence of postmodern theory and through the furore surrounding exhibitions such as "Magiciens de la Terre", at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

The first standard response to art like Western Desert painting was anecdotal, journalistic and biographical. Based around reporters' accounts of insiders and field workers, it read like a set of character references.[23]

The second reaction to Aboriginal art was to reconstruct the artists in a Western image, emphasising the "pure" qualities of the art and talking about it as if it represented a new phase of international abstraction. The crudity of this view prevented integration of Aboriginal art into discussion and exhibition, in the long run producing a discourse about art at the level of restaurant criticism – an appreciation of subtle audacities. Formalist interpretation of these paintings was as absurd as representing works like the

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6:8 Donkeyman Lee Tjupurrula, *Yata Yata/Tjarinpa, West of Lake Mackay*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 175 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne and Coo-ee Art, Sydney.

6:9 Dave Perle Ross, *Arunbunga's Star Flight*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 215 x 124 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne and Delmore Gallery, Alice Springs.

6:10 Pansy Napangati, *Untitled*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 162 x 90 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne and Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney.

Russian art that emerged to international attention at exactly the same time, for example, Svetlana Kopystiansky's towers and walls of books, as purely abstract constructions, as if printed pages and words were simply neutral raw materials.

The third standard reflex was an ethnographic representation of works that were, however, produced for circulation as art. This procedure usually matched Aboriginal paintings with crushingly banal symbolic explanations. Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri's *Site of Putjana in the Artist's Country*, 1991, was, contrary to wall-text explanations, "about" its mythic description in a paradoxical and ironic way; the painting was deliberately *about*, but did not *represent*, its Dreaming source.

The last, and most complex, response of Western critics was a hypermannerist denial of authenticity. The new art was accused of participation in the accelerated erasure of

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cultural difference, through assimilation and absorption into Western art systems. The effect of this purism – certainly not intended – was to quarantine these artists from the rest of the world and to image them as its passive victims. By the mid-1990s many Australian artists, both black and white, including Gordon Bennett and Tim Johnson, were crossing these demarcation lines from opposite directions.

All of these ways of making sense out of Aboriginal art – journalism, formalism, "mix'n'match" museology and hypermannerism – perpetuated long discredited divisions between form and content. Western demystifications in the long term were a source of disinformation. The desire to fix Aboriginal Australian art within the particular structures of First World myth reflected a world view that could not accommodate other logics, and a politics that would not come to terms with unequal divisions between rich and poor. Two very different examples will illustrate these distinctions.

The works of the most apparently traditional Western Desert painters showed rapid, unpredictable transition and evolution, refusing the categories of eternal and unchanging art. Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Papunya artist Pansy Napangati, for example, schematised the desert landscape in signs and designs that became fields of uncertain provenance and type. According to Pansy Napangati, a field of dots flanking the central line of encampments, digging sticks and seated women in *Untitled, Number 3*, 1988, represented waves of desert flowers. Her testimony clarified the picture's codes but, as well, revealed the extent to which contrary significations took place. The use of personal symbolism, such as the field of flowers, indicated the increasing importance of individual invention in Napangati's work, as well as an awareness of the role that she, like other artists, was now playing as a public figure. This self-consciousness was at odds with many commentators' ideas of timeless Aboriginal art. Napangati was not just showing off what she knew: her multiple figurations were strategies, a game of hide-and-seek and a far-from-disinterested statement of ownership. Her work issued from a metaphoric sensibility, and the description of experience unfolded temporally and horizontally. Although her painting offered the same pleasure of imperial possession offered by any easel painting of landscape, the viewer's sense of "possession" of a view was blocked by the production of a surfeit of competing meanings.

Australia's $10 banknote was the subject of litigation by an Arnhem Land artist from Australia's "Top End" in the late 1980s. The banknote included an unauthorised copy of Terry Yumbulul's ceremonial morning-star pole. The case was eventually settled out of court, but controversy and legal action respectively surrounded the use of Aboriginal motifs by contemporary Australian artists and T-shirt designers.

Non-Aboriginal Australians continued to miss the very point of Aboriginal ownership of places, images, and rights to their reproduction. These maps and charts were strategic, acting like deeds and titles as well as art made by *auteurs*. The word "business" was used in some tribal communities to refer to secret ceremonies. To understand this diverse art required that other Australians look beyond its candid inaccessibility to take seriously the business of Aboriginal artists with their audience. Having in a sense done away with imagery, these artists dissipated an awareness of the remaining void by proliferating a multitude of descriptions. Their paintings enacted a refusal to represent that collided with non-Aboriginal expectations, but coincided at times with the ironic minimalism examined in an earlier chapter. As in all good travel stories, Western audiences found themselves and their postmodern ideologies in the most surprising places.

6:11 Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Desert Life Cycle*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 231 x 130 cm. Courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne and Utopia Art, Sydney.

CULTURAL MEDIATION AND MIMICRY

Tim Johnson: Navigating Constraint and Silence

The intercultural role of the go-between – the intermediary between cultures – is both complicated and dangerous. Several white Australian artists have attempted to work in co-operation with Aboriginal people and to learn from their cultures. Although Tim Johnson was probably the best known of these artists, there were many others, including Alice Springs-based painter Rod Moss, installation artist Anne Mosey and several community-based muralists including Carol Ruff.

Tim Johnson's first visit to Alice Springs in 1980 was prompted by marvellously oracular dreams about the Yardbirds' lead singer, and since then he evolved a complex cross-cultural *mélange* of visual languages, incorporating elements from Papunya painting, Mahayana Buddhist art and, more recently, Native American imagery; he also worked with Aboriginal artists and their communities during the explosion of Western Desert painting during the 1980s. His meticulously respectful appropriations of Aboriginal art represented the intersection of his wry 1970s performances with indomitable psychedelia. He recirculated two attributes of Aboriginal painting: forms (he was deeply respectful of traditional owners' copyright); and space (objects were distinguished by both formlessness and exact location within mystical cartographies). In part because of his deliberately constrained invention, his paintings appeared, *en masse*, to be repetitive and undifferentiated as, initially, did many Western Desert paintings. This impression was unfair: uniformity resolved into its opposite on closer inspection. Seemingly lollipop lyricism was, in reality, a mordant Clear Light with dark edges.

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Johnson consistently refused to act the authoritative original artist, preferring the role of go-between, collaborating with many artists – Aboriginal, Tibetan and Native American. His paintings were the heterogenous ground across which other artists left signs; his contribution to many paintings was either a neutral infill of dots or a brushy, fragmented field of hypersuggestive distances. Early Papunya works reflected Johnson's initial impulse, on arrival, to document the Aboriginal community. By the mid-1980s, his pictures shifted into another gear: adapting the ambiguous, pixilated Papunya dot-screens, Johnson incorporated their images into his own by asking the artists to complete his paintings. In more recent work, the previously ubiquitous dots became intermittent and passages of gestural, metallic paint formed gaps like the reflective, luminous voids of Buddhism. His analysis of the space of Western Desert paintings insisted on its extendable, infinite depth. *Yam Dreaming*, 1989-92, virtually eliminated the artist's trademark dot-screen. Around Michael Nelson Tjakamarra's design, Johnson painted a darkly romantic moonscape; the spiral pattern and underlying recessions together suggested the drama of Mannerist distortion. In a Tim Johnson/Michael Oglesa Red Shirt/Karma Phuntsock collaboration, *Judgement*, 1993, vaporous space became violent; angelic figures dissolved in the carnivorous multicultural radiance surrounding a serenely floating Buddha.

The separate authorial voices in Johnson's collaborations always remained identifiable. As part of the flood of textual representation delivering Aboriginal culture to the West, Johnson's humble stance constituted him as a particularly reliable witness. Over more than a decade, his painting accumulated a particular discursive authority as a post-colonial form of conceptual art. As landscapes, his works did not attempt to possess the

6:12 Tim Johnson/Michael Oglesa Red Shirt/Karma Phuntsock collaboration, *Judgement*, 1993, mixed media, 180 x 180 cm. Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney.

6:13 Tim Johnson, *Eden Burns*, 1991, acrylic on linen, 150 x 210 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Greg Weight. Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney

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soul of a place; they articulated an altogether more unfamiliar, incomplete subjectivity, imagining spaces of idealised reconciliation. The dots and purple hazes of his collaborations were not the transcendental spaces of early Modernism because they were not emptied of signification. Instead, they represented the naming and navigation of discourses of constraint and silence. Tim Johnson came to occupy a spaced-out niche – absolutely crucial and ambiguous – at the mutable edges of contemporary art.

Juan Davila: Art History at the Periphery

During the early 1980s as described in Chapter 3, Juan Davila painted images from the margins of gender and sexuality; he "perverted" the straightforward icons of Western art. By the late 1980s Juan Davila's use of appropriation began to change. His paintings increasingly quoted and copied from art history at the periphery, rather than the European mainstream. Copies, in Juan Davila's work and in those of the other artists in this chapter, had special meanings at the Australian periphery. Mimicry was a strategy of reinventing meaning through the recombination of cultural forms, rather than the familiar "emptying out" of content attempted by Australian, American and European postmodern artists during the 1980s.

Pictures such as *Retablo*, 1989, for example, included a hybrid mix of Latin American art and Australian painting. A *retablo* is a small votive painting belonging to a Mexican tradition of folk art; made by humble artisans, they usually feature narratives with inscriptions, a tale of suffering and a *coda* of divine intervention. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who became a cult figure amongst neo-expressionist artists and feminist critics during the 1980s, was considerably influenced by the *retablo* tradition.

Many of Davila's 1989 paintings, such as *Retablo*, were undeniably powerful – rather like being caught in a tropical storm. Because of their overwhelming presence, one wished that it was possible to feel some interest or empathy in Davila's cast of characters. He did not, however, communicate anything about his largely Latin American subjects – Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and others – except their identities. They were, as in *Stupid as a Painter*, ciphers constituting an argument. Davila said that "painting has no inner life" and he juxtaposed *retablo* narratives with homosexual pornography, modernist painting and science fiction. *Monogram*, in common with much of Davila's work, was a gallery of identities in the Australian avant-garde and a museum of works of art: Rauschenberg's combine painting of the same name was parodied in the title, although Davila included a kangaroo instead of a goat. The game of find-the-art-work was his way of telegraphing to the metropolitan centre – New York – that its gaze comprehended only what was generated by its own tradition.

The specific identity of people seen in these outsized paintings was clearly of the greatest importance, since Davila chose to render museum labels for some figures, like Frida Kahlo, or to brand others with the marks of their signature style. Mike Parr, for example, appeared in *Monogram* with his head anamorphically distorted. In *Retablo*, Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergères* was populated by Fred Williams (with a swastika around his neck), John Nixon (his face reduced to a Suprematist cross), Mike Parr, Albert Tucker and John Brack. These were portraits of the professional and public aspects of people – of an appearance within art's economy rather than revelations of personality. Public identities posed in tableaux that were messy and anarchic but highly self-conscious: the characters were known to Davila and "occupied" their roles. The meanings of

his large allegories were far more explicit and less bound by theory than the artist and his critics assumed. The Australian animals and kitsch of *Monogram* were borrowed from children's stories and games. Their presence was obviously metaphorical and suggested the play, reward, punishment and judgement that, like the *retablo*, was the painter's chief narrative. Images of people engaged in sexual play shadowed by animal accomplices (for example voyeuristic lap-dogs in Rococo artist Fragonard's paintings) usually heighten the symbolism of erotic longing or desire. Thus, the stuffed kangaroo whose head burst through the canvas in *Monogram* was a reluctant symbol of traditional desires.

It seemed, then, that there was a productive inconsistency in Davila's paintings through the 1980s. His notoriety could be explained by suggesting that he heightened and refined the fantasies of his art-world contemporaries. This was the background for the various scandals that surrounded his work, like the seizure of *Stupid as a Painter* or the events of August 1994: Davila was at the centre of a minor diplomatic firestorm when the putative exhibition in London of his portrait of a transvestite Símon Bolívar (the Latin American hero of the wars of independence) prompted protests to the Chilean government from its Venezuelan, Colombian and Ecuadorian counterparts. On the one hand, these scandals were probably an integral aspect of Davila's activity as an artist. On the other, Davila imaged an unrelenting paradise of parody, contained in the museums that he affected to despise and scandalise. Although ironic meanings were made abundantly clear, *Monogram* was a hybrid testimony to the intoxication of dreaming.

Juan Davila's large installation, *Interior with Landscape*, 1992-3, appeared at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1993 as part of a survey of contemporary South American art, "La Cita Transcultural". Its seven assemblages combined different images of possession, oppression and conquest: a panoramic view of a volcano from a mountaintop; silhouettes of couples copulating in several different positions spied upon by an excited voyeur; a representative of 1960s Op Art (by Argentinian artist Luis Tomasello, collected at the time by Sydney University's Power Institute) embedded within a chaotic bas-relief *merzbau* of decorative hybrid Mexican-Australian cubism. As in his earlier works, Davila's installation was a compendium of sources: in this case of imported forms that artists of colonised countries, from the late 18th century onwards, combined with the art of indigenous peoples to create a defiantly hybrid culture. *Interior with Landscape* perverted postmodernism and modernism through mimicry and copying.

What, then, was Davila suggesting in this heterogenous installation? From a cosmopolitan modernist viewpoint, the great European and American art centres were places of light and the periphery was a site of darkness. Davila's metaphors of copulation, possession, domination and exploration were juxtaposed with images of stylistic mutability, as science fiction interpolated itself into cubist still life. Davila's friend and essayist, Latin American art critic Nelly Richard, suggested in a particularly acidic essay that the dual metaphor of an original and its copy was an apt description of the centre's colonisation of cultures at the periphery such as Australia or Chile.[24] Richard observed elsewhere that: "Our problem then consists in demanding a gaze accustomed to disqualify all secondary or minor forms of art under the "déjà vu" label".[25] Accordingly, the gaze of the Western centre comprehended only what was generated by its own tradition, ignoring the specific social and political contexts that emerged in other cultures. The cosmopolitan centre was invariably conceived as the inevitable model for all innovation – the original. The periphery was the copy and its artists were involved in the mimetic reproduction of lan-

24 Nelly Richard, "Postmodern Disalignments and Realignments of the Centre/Periphery", *Art Journal* v. 51 n. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 57-59.

25 Nelly Richard, in Juan Davila (interviewer), "Interview with Nelly Richard", *Art & Text* n.8, Summer 1982/3, p. 57.

guage that was subordinate in power and originality to that of the original. This arrangement was especially convenient (if complex) for it included its inverse: the exotic nature of the periphery enabled the centre, which saw itself as cosmopolitan and imagined that its synthetic internationalism was fake, to retrieve authenticity through sanctioned theft. Since art at the periphery (aside from pale copies of Western models) was viewed as exclusively and purely ethnic, it was also allowed to be uniquely authentic. It was then pillaged as a mine of inspiration.

By the early 1990s, however, it was no longer possible to reduce the relationship between societies at the periphery and those at the Western centre to that of copies and originals. Therefore, Davila's *Interior with Landscape* collaged and parodied reproduced styles as they existed at the periphery in a particularly disturbing way: he emphasised through their transvestism, remorseless mutability and brutal sexuality that they existed, both at the centre and at the periphery, without systematic organic and structural basis.

Juan Davila's postmodernism had commenced as a dialogue with the metropolitan centres of world art; from the later 1980s into the 1990s, his ongoing subjects were domination and authority, but also increasingly the continuous alternative presence of marginal societies. There were, for Davila, many margins and they were not solely geographical.

As long ago as 1978, in his widely influential book *Orientalism*, Palestinian/American critic Edward Said had traced Western writers' fantasies about the margins, and particularly the Middle East, analysing the tension inherent in colonial discourse: a conflict between an imperial vision of domination that fixed others' identities, which he called "orientalism", and the need to acknowledge each cultural moment's specificity in place and time, allowing for difference and change.[26] In Said's schema, the reforming, civilising mission of the West was constantly threatened by the displacing gaze of its colonised double.[27] The imperfect imitations and mimicry by the postcolonial subject disrupted the dominating discourse and displaced fixed identities. This insight became rapidly familiar in postcolonial theory: at the margins of metropolitan desire, in the ambivalent world of ex-colonial culture, the canonical objects of the West became accidental, incidental, and erratic. In the work of Juan Davila and many other Australian artists, including Matthÿs Gerber, Susan Norrie, John Young and, most pertinently, Narelle Jubelin, these objects lost their representational authority.

26 Edward Said, *Orientalism* [1978], Penguin Books, London, 1985.

27 See also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in Annette Michelson (ed.), *October: the first decade, 1976-1986*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p. 318.

28 See, for example, a postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Marina Warner, *INDIGO or Mapping The Waters*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1992.

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Postcolonial theory took cultural hybridity as its subject. It suggested that modernism and postmodernism were culturally conditioned and, translated to an Australian or ex-colonial environment, would probably not embody an inherently avant-garde critique. The link between cutting-edge art and real radicalism – political, ecological, ideological or social – no longer existed. This, in turn, implied that postcolonial artists would be interested in kitsch and bad taste, which were cited in the work of most of the artists in this chapter – both of which were an anathema to the avant-garde.

6:15

Narelle Jubelin: Colonial Culture and Canonical Texts

As one of the most important methods of cultural control, colonising cultures always circulated their own libraries of canonical texts. Postcolonial writers and artists, therefore, now frequently rewrote the great European masterpieces.[28] The creative possibilities of revision allowed both black and white postcolonial artists to evolve new perspectives. Narelle Jubelin's *Boer War Comrades Relaxing*, 1988, displaced and translated imperial

history to the edge of another, juxtaposed, Australian narrative. Jubelin's use of translation – transforming Boer War photographs into delicate *petit point*, and craft techniques into contemporary art – was a type of open-ended appropriation that set itself at a vast distance from straightforward postmodernism. Her parodic response to modern history, and the astonishing kitsch Australiana picture-frame, indicated more than an anxiety of influence.

Jubelin's installations were not allegorical arrangements. They were indexes of precious objects in frames and furniture, drawing together fragments of texts and images by other, often unknown, artists, craftspeople and authors. Her pieces were small-scale and labour-intensive, featuring exquisitely made panels in the needlecraft technique of *petit point*, antique frames and objects from colonial and imperial histories (including, on different occasions, old coins, milk-jug covers and tribal masks). She presented these combinations as site-specific installations, researching the history of each gallery's specific location in advance of her exhibitions. Jubelin's works were shown widely in Australia and internationally: *Trade Delivers People* was shown in the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale in 1990; *Foreign Affairs* was created for "Places With A Past: New Site Specific Art in Charleston", at the Spoleto Festival, Charleston, U.S.A. in 1991; *Dead Slow* was shown in Glasgow during 1991 and in Sydney at the 1992 Biennale.

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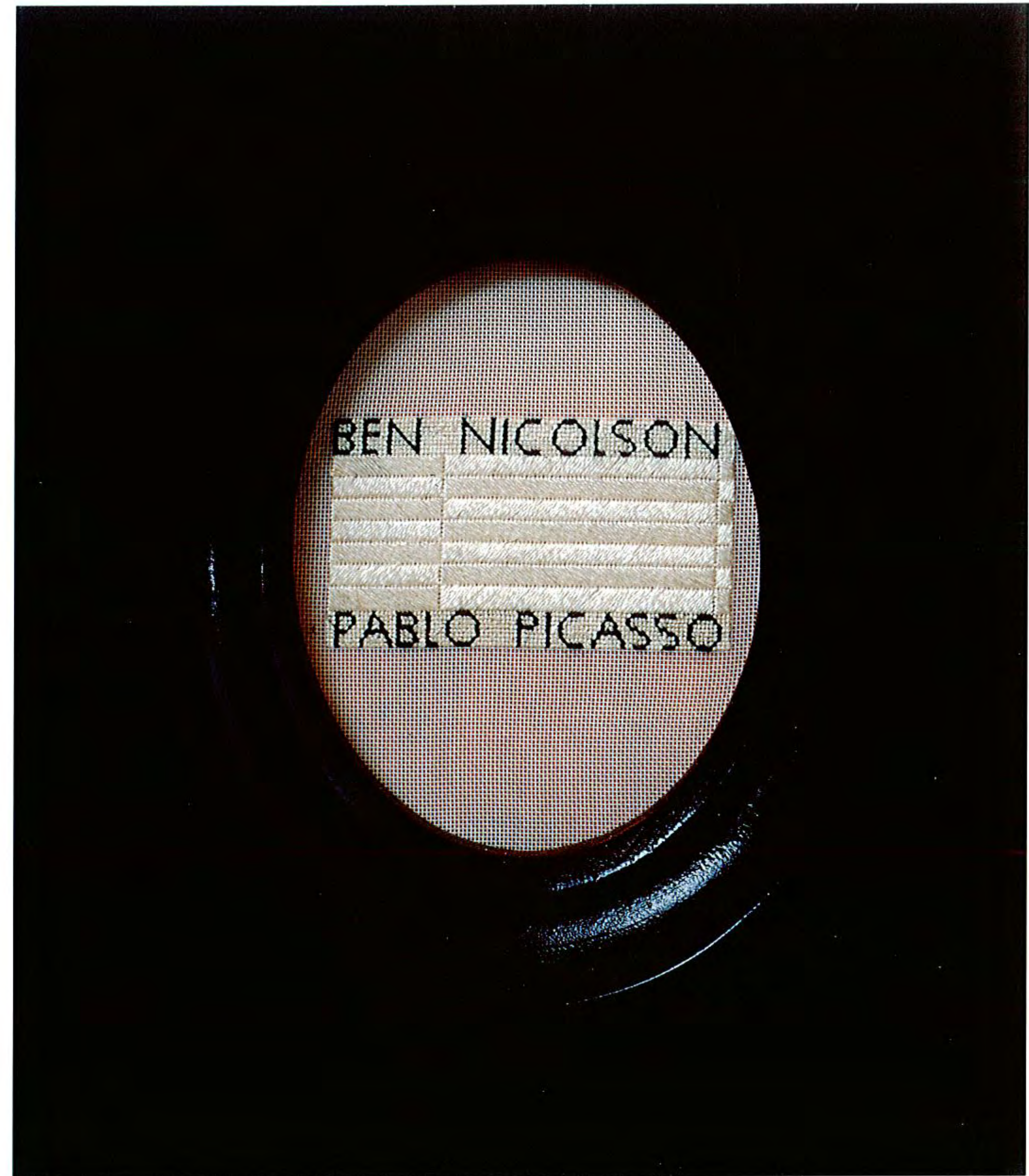
Trade Delivers People, 1989-93, comprised images of cultural exchange along imperial trade routes, including a mask from the Pacific Islands, another African coin-covered mask from the Ivory Coast, a needle-point picture of a steam-driven warship, elaborately carved wooden frames and a New Guinea brideprice armlet made of porcelain buttons. The installation's parts were clearly carefully chosen, both for their ability to suggest the networks of trade and cultural transactions amongst cultures but also for their often spellbinding curiosity and beauty. Thus, *Trade Delivers People* deliberately combined the two qualities of resonance and wonder described in the previous chapter: it emphasised astonishing attention to detail and preciousness, but framed these sensations for the viewer through the apparatus of didactic museological arrangements and carefully chosen references to local traditions that valued these elements of beauty, intricacy and preciousness.

Jubelin recycled items – all of which exaggerated the expenditure of labour – from museum collections, antique shops and forgotten craftspeople, combining them with her *petit point* interpolations, which were either citations or copies of other artists' works. She fetishised this unusual technique, aware that the fetish had become, in many artists' works, a postmodern paradigm for the art object. The constituents of *Trade Delivers People* that did not illustrate exchange mechanisms – of ships, trading tokens, money and gunboat diplomacy – instead catalogued a range of displacements of identity. *Trade Delivers People* was therefore a catalogue of artistic methods of representation, mediated by the embroidered depiction of different types of "self". A silhouette in black and cream needlework of the artist was a depiction of likeness through a pre-modern mimetic formula; the quotation in yellow and green of a similar form – Sidney Nolan's *Moon Boy* – juxtaposed a representation of another type – of mid-20th century surrealism's sense of a disruptive self. A more minimal panel, of a vertical zip made from loose horizontal threads on a blank orange field, imitated the reductive, sublime sense of self in American Post-Painterly Abstraction such as that of Barnett Newman. Another tapestry copied the contents page from the National Gallery of Victoria's *Art Bulletin* of 1967-

6:14 Narelle Jubelin, *Boer War Comrades Relaxing*, 1988, *petit point* and frame. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

6:15 Narelle Jubelin, *Trade Delivers People*, 1989-93, installation including Pacific Islands mask, Ivory Coast coin-covered mask, *petit point* pictures, carved wooden frames and a New Guinea bride-price armlet covered in porcelain buttons. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

6:16 Narelle Jubelin, *Foreign Affairs* (detail), 1990-91, mixed media and *petit point* installation, one of four groupings of miniatures placed in the corners of the Customs House mezzanine around an ironwork centrepiece set at the building's ground level. Photograph: John McWilliams. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.



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68, and thus referred to the constitution of an identity (in this case corporate) from the written, listed total of many assembled parts.

Jubelin's installation in the Charleston Customs House, *Foreign Affairs*, 1990-91, comprised four groupings of miniatures placed in the corners of the Customs House mezzanine and an iron-work centrepiece set at the building's ground level, each of which represented an aspect of local Charleston history and the city's relationship to the world through trade. In one corner, elegantly framed slave tags were arranged around the central icon of two United States coins framed in ivory. Another corner contained miniatures based on local ironwork arranged around an ivory-framed centrepiece made from brass detonation springs which had been produced in Sydney for export to the United States. *Foreign Affairs* made relationships visible by juxtaposition: Diane Losche observed that in this case the linkage between international order, the artistic avant-garde and local communities was made manifest as the labour of ordinary people.[29]

29 Diane Losche, "Subtle Tension in the Work of Narelle Jubelin", *Art and Australia* v.29 n.4, Winter 1992, p. 466.

The important Guggenheim collection of modernist paintings, as Jubelin knew, had its first major showing in Charleston in 1936. In the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*, 1990-91, she translated the pure language of international modernism into a hybrid postcolonial form, converting modernist abstraction in the Guggenheim collection into *petit point* vignettes and a litany of modernist artists' names in fragile handmade lace. These were not faithful copies of specific paintings, but distillations of familiar styles in modernist geometric abstraction. Jubelin's work was inextricably embedded in the network of art history; scaled down to intimate size, her logos, names and diagrams on cloth were both deconstruction and homage. The preciousness of the frames and fantastic, exaggerated expenditure of labour, like a parody of the economy of capital, did not trivialise or programmatically "subvert"; they memorialised a utopian sector of modernist mythology. Jubelin embroidered the signatures and names of great modernist artists in pairs (Ben Nicholson with Picasso, for example) placing them around a Foreign Order medal in an ivory frame. In *Foreign Affairs*' rendering of the Solomon R. Guggenheim collection in needle-point names, Jubelin contextualised international modernism as a fetish of a particular place and time, mimicking modernism's forms rather than appropriating or approximating its appearance.

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Generic versions of similar modernist abstraction were then created and memorialised in the needlecraft manuals incorporated in *Dead Slow*, 1991-2, which enacted through the shadow play of adapted designs and patterns the uneasy decay or mutation of styles as they moved from centre to periphery. If *Dead Slow* appeared, on the surface, to delineate the export of items from Scotland or designs from Berlin to the far reaches of empire, then it clearly drew a parallel between this dissemination and Dada artist Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of mass-produced objects as readymades. Duchamp commenced his appropriation of everyday objects at the dawn of modern consumerism and mass production; at that time it was still possible to imagine that the possession of one mass-produced bottle rack would imply the possession of a generic, homogenous range of bottle racks.

6:17 Narelle Jubelin, *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*, (section of *Foreign Affairs* installation, Customs House, Charleston), 1990-91, *petit point*. Photograph: John McWilliams. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

6:18 Narelle Jubelin, *Dead Slow*, 1991-2, mixed media and *petit point* installation, Glasgow. Courtesy Mori Gallery, Sydney.

Jubelin converted Duchamp's methods to the more heterogenous intellectual and feminist climate of the 1990s. Her carefully rendered "readymades" were, like American artist Sherrie Levine's watercolours of the early 1980s, new works of modernist art, craft and design; they were copied and presented, with deadpan elegance, as didactic, educational museum installations. The viewer's attention was directed to framing and context,

while the various sources and authors of her quoted "texts" – the fish-scale patterns for pressed steel sheets or real 19th century Gujarati wooden printing blocks – were either left intact or partially but accurately copied. If Jubelin's installations constituted a denial of authorship typical of 1980s postmodernism, her needle-points and carefully curated displays were deliberately passive, accentuating both preciousness and fidelity.

Occidentalism: Reversing Messages from the Emperor

The precedent of the feminist art of the 1970s enabled artists such as Jubelin and Susan Norrie, whose work was described in Chapter 4, to adapt representations through simulating their processes. Although a new abstraction had emerged during the late 1980s as both homage to and rejection of modernist abstraction's claims, Jubelin's *petit points* were at least as aware of the readymade and simulation. Her eclectic works, however, deliberately and precisely demonstrated that modernist styles were inherently neither critically reflective nor historically necessary. Jubelin's abstractions, in both the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* and *Dead Slow*, were self-conscious, consummate deceptions: they apparently sought to disrupt the paternalistic canon of modernist abstraction through spelling out its fate as decoration. Her small pieces of cloth were thus shrouds at modern art's funeral. Jubelin's *petit points* sidestepped recapitulation of the modernist crisis by virtue of their exquisite craft quality and fabrication in a medium other than that of oil paint. She demonstrated a contrary, feminist command of technique that was hard to test since its criteria were so obscure. Her simulation of painting by needlework reduced the history of modernism to conventions, impersonating the medium's history and suggesting its parallel narrative, that of commerce.

Impersonation, translation and mimicry were particularly important tools for artists working in peripheral art centres. The seduction of a literal identification with the history of Western art, especially through translation into a perversely inappropriate medium, allowed a postcolonial projection of fantasy that defined Australian culture against a Western Other. Reversing the more familiar Orientalist schema with its unorthodox and unfamiliar inversion, Jubelin, like many other Australian artists during the 1990s, projected an unorthodox, distorted image of the West back towards its centres.