Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Australian Historical Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rahs20

No Country for Old Men: Australian Art History's Difficulty with Aboriginal Art

Charles Green

To cite this article: Charles Green (2023) No Country for Old Men: Australian Art History's Difficulty with Aboriginal Art, Australian Historical Studies, 54:4, 606-624, DOI: 10.1080/1031461X.2023.2220712

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2023.2220712

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 08 Nov 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rahs20

No Country for Old Men: Australian Art History's Difficulty with Aboriginal Art

CHARLES GREEN

The subject of this article is the absence of Aboriginal art during the period that established the idea of a distinctively Australian modern art. It is intended as a contribution to the historiography of modern and contemporary Australian art history. The period discussed is the two decades between 1962, when Bernard Smith published Australian Painting, 1788–1960, and 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentenary. The article explores what changed in these years when art historians, critics, and curators, albeit belatedly and reluctantly, finally began to acknowledge the great contemporary Aboriginal painting that had long been in many artists' sights as inspiration and model, and in plain view on display in the so-called primitive cultures' sections of state museums. It argues that this was because it did not seem part of the national story of art.

The subject of this article is the absence of Aboriginal art in the then-emerging discipline of Australian art history during the period that established the idea of a distinctively Australian modern art. My article is intended not as a contribution to Indigenous art history but as a contribution to understanding the history of modern and contemporary Australian art history.[1] The period discussed is the two decades between 1962, when Bernard Smith published *Australian Painting, 1788–1960*, the foundational postwar text on Australian art, and 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentenary.[2] I will cite not only art historians but also artists, since artists' works and words should inform historians of

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

[1] See: Ian McLean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2011), especially 17–75; Susan Lowish, *Rethinking Australia's Art History: The Challenge of Aboriginal Art* (New York: Routledge, 2018), on pre-1971 approaches to Aboriginal art, particularly anthropologists and natural scientists.

[2] Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, 1st ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962); after reprinting in 1965, a revised edition appeared in 1970. Then for the 1991 third edition Terry Smith added three chapters, including on contemporary Aboriginal art, redressing Bernard Smith's compartmentalisation of Indigenous art. On Smith see: Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl: The Life of Bernard Smith* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2016); Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory, and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Australian art. Further, I argue that it was artists who put transcultural synthesis – art drawing on both Indigenous and modernist European artistic methods or seeking to communicate across apparently incommensurate cultural lines – into practice long before art historians saw Indigenous art's necessity inside Australian art history.

The article explores why art historians, critics, and curators belatedly began to acknowledge the power of contemporary Aboriginal painting that had long been in many artists' sights as inspiration and model, and in plain view on display in the so-called primitive cultures' sections of state museums (but rarely in state art galleries). It reflects on why the embrace of Aboriginal art was so late in state galleries and in histories of Australian art, arguing that this was because it did not seem part of a national story that was dominated by a model of colonial, then neo-colonial, dependency. From the vantage point of the present, with Indigenous painting proudly foregrounded across all our state art galleries' displays of Australian art, it seems inexplicable that art historians and art museums for so long failed to imagine that Indigenous artists would play a powerful role in the story of Australian art.

Then, quite suddenly, around 1988, many art critics, curators, and historians saw there were vast gaps that existed in the story of Australian art if Indigenous artists were not prominent. Why so late? Did the mythology of a young nation enable the avoidance of adult responsibility for decolonisation? That mythology underpins *Australian Painting*, in which Smith describes the forging of a distinctive and unique national culture. But it is not a sufficient explanation, for Smith was alert to Australian culture's rigidity and it is one of the narratives of 'Leviticus', chapter 6 of his book. Who would be the important artists central to Australian art? The factors that drove these choices were eurocentrism and the idea of a European modernism framing an Australian canon. Canon-creators left out artists they thought were peripheral, who did not fit their preconceptions, who they just did not know about, and, most of all, who did not graft neatly onto the arboreal trunk of North Atlantic artistic evolution. This meant mirroring the contemporaneous 'progress' of European and American modern and contemporary art, with Australians always almost up to date.

Indigenous art does not fit this pattern. Nor, in fact, did Australian art with or without Indigenous art ever fit this model. It is therefore important to negotiate the sometimes-hermetic terminologies of art history to grasp how radical it is to refuse the blinkers that assume belatedness at the periphery and mimicry of US and European models, for not all national art histories are born equal. In other words, an Australcentric history that included 'Aboriginal art' in 'Australian art history' was always going to face hegemonic resistance.

Australian Painting 1788–1960: Mapping the white settler nation

In 1962 Bernard Smith's landmark book, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, was published. It was by far the most ambitious mapping of the field of Australian art

history to that date, a portrait of the art of an alternately proud and brittle white settler nation from first settlement on. It became enormously influential. Smith saw Australian art in terms of successive cycles of local artists' exodus from Australia and their prodigal returns. Explaining art through Smith's model meant focusing on dependency and reaction to English, European and American academic and modern art, and then a return to Australia to transfer and diffuse the news from North Atlantic art centres. The Australian Heidelberg School artists travelled by ship to London from the 1890s onwards to Europe and the UK, as later did long-term expatriates like Rupert Bunny and Anne Dangar to Paris. After 1945, yet another generation made their pilgimage to London. Eventually, in the 1960s, a newly-obligatory sojourn to New York began for young artists like Brett Whiteley, Robert Jacks, John Davis, and Ian Burn.

Smith's narrative was to be knocked sideways by the emergence of the Indigenous contemporary painting that was being made in 1962 even as *Australian Painting* first appeared. Smith's justifiably famous Boyer Lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *The Spectre of Truganini* (1980), called attention to Indigenous culture and powerfully assailed the cult of forgetfulness in relation to Australian Aborigines. He was drawing on anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, who foregrounded that insight in his own Boyer Lectures of 1968, and on the thinking of Aboriginal rights advocates Charles Rowley and Nugget Coombs.[3] But countering forgetfulness about the Indigenous presence in Australian history was easier for Smith, even as late as *The Spectre of Truganini*, than the task of acknowledging their art. Aboriginal painting – which was, we shall insist, cosmopolitan art made in Australia – could not be encompassed by *Australian Painting*'s cycles of exodus, expatriatism, and return. Smith's omission of any reference to Aboriginal art followed from his stubborn belief that he was not capable of writing on Indigenous culture, that it was properly the subject of inquiry by anthropologists, not art historians like himself.[4] So, art made by Aborigines did not figure at all in *Australian Painting* except once or twice as the sources for White artists, and in a passing, two-line passage about the Central Australian school of watercolour painting founded, he noted, by White tonal watercolourist Rex Battarbee, in which Battarbee's student Albert Namatjira and his brothers were mentioned as prominent.[5]

The dependency model of Australian art that he developed in *Australian Painting* was preceded in Smith's earlier, more remarkable book, *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945), in which he unequivocally rejected a simplistic ideal of a 'national school' of art that would simply be the accurate recording of symbols

---

[3] Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980), 52. On *Spectre of Truganini* see Tim Bonyhady, 'The Uncritical Culture', *Eureka Street* 7, no. 8 (October 1997): 24–32; above all see McLean's definitive chapter on the historiography of Indigenous art, 'Aboriginal Art and the Artworld', in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*.

[4] On Smith's refusal to consider Aboriginal art as Australian art see Palmer, 275–79; also see Susan Lowish, 'European Vision and Aboriginal Art: Blindness and Insight in the Work of Bernard Smith', *Thesis Eleven* 82 (2005): 62–71.

[5] Smith, *Australian Painting*, 115.

(gum trees, emus, koalas, and the bush).[6] Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, that bush ideal had been propagated by literary journals and writers, in *The Communist Review*, *Realist Writer*, and *Overland*, which promoted the idea of a bush legend and a uniquely Australian realism, taking it as the ultimate and central criterion of artistic value. It was crucial for the left that it retained the traditional bush–socialist nexus that had appeared so convincing during the 1920s and 1930s when their revolutionary cause had been aligned with nationalism. Theories of socialist realism enabled intellectuals to develop a notion of a continuous tradition of Australian realism stretching from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. So, a national school, or national tradition as Smith preferred to call it, 'arises from a *people* as they struggle with their social and geographical environment'.[7] Yet, Smith argued, this tradition 'only arises from the gradual assimilation of many overseas tendencies'.[8] Consequently, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, he wrote, 'is largely concerned with the mutations which have occurred in styles and fashions originating overseas as they have been assimilated into conditions, social, political, moral and aesthetic, existing in Australia'.[9] In sum, the younger Smith saw with visionary force that Australian art was 'an international fusion of many national styles' and he devoted prescient thought to reparation and the recognition of Indigenous people, although not to their art.[10]

In 1960, fifteen years after his first book and a mere two years before *Australian Painting* appeared in print, Smith published *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1960), which traced the impact of the Antipodes on Enlightenment Europe.[11] Its main themes were summarised in 1962 (the year of *Australian Painting*'s publication) by historian Max Crawford, Head of the History Department at the University of Melbourne and a senior colleague of Smith's, who published a detailed review of *European Vision*. He explained Smith's groundbreaking thesis: that the findings of scientific observation in Oceania placed pressure on the visual conventions dear to taste-makers in late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Europe.[12] He wrote that the book explained

> the evolution of typical landscape, the disturbance of the natural philosopher's perfect 'chain of being', the dialogue of noble and ignoble savage, the destruction of neo-classical idealised painting by the scientists' interest in recording man and nature as he saw them.[13]

---

[6] Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945), 21.
[7] Ibid. Smith's emphasis.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).
[12] R.M. Crawford, '*European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850. A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* by Bernard Smith', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 10, no. 39 (November 1962): 379–81.
[13] Ibid., 381.

Australian Painting, Smith's next book, appeared shortly after, and is far more marked by the Cold War period in which both books were written. The ideological constraints of Australian anti-communism and Cold War neo-colonisation by the USA are worth briefly sketching in, for they exerted such a powerful impact on the few available outlets for writing on the art of the period. Art criticism was fragmentary. Newspaper critics, then as now, did little more than review exhibitions. No specialist, serious art journals or magazines existed, for the prestigious Sydney-based *Art in Australia*, founded in 1916, had ceased publication in 1942 and its new incarnation, (tellingly renamed) *Art and Australia*, was not launched until 1963, a year after *Australian Painting* was published. Artists' newsletters such as the Contemporary Art Society's *Broadsheet* were ecumenically uncritical. Most discussions and debates about art were conducted in literary journals: *Meanjin*, *Quadrant*, and *Overland*. For public academics like Smith, the Cold War situation in Australia was never as brutal as McCarthyism in the USA but, even so, Smith felt its bitter chill when he left England on the *Otranto* in late 1950 and arrived in Sydney Harbour on New Year's Day, 1951. He found his precious job as education officer at the Art Gallery of New South Wales under threat, only saved by the intervention of Mary Alice Evatt, the first woman to become a gallery trustee in Australia, and her prominent Labor politician husband, H.V. 'Doc' Evatt. During the 1940s and early 1950s, security files were kept on thousands of Australians, including 63 staff members of the University of Melbourne. By 1956, when Smith took up his teaching position in the Fine Arts Department of Melbourne University, anti-communism was at its most virulent. He was known to have left-wing sympathies and his communist past was common knowledge even though Joseph Burke, Professor of Fine Arts and no friend of the left, did appoint him. Burke had fallen out with *Meanjin*'s editor Clem Christesen in 1948 over the publication of Eric Dark's article 'Political Bias of the Press'.[14] Burke wrote to Christesen, declaring that '*Meanjin* ought to expose Soviet Communism as the chief danger to intellectual freedom that exists in our age and society'.[15] Smith himself had published five articles on art in *Meanjin* in the 1950s. He was still vulnerable to denunciation from the Right. But at the same time, from the 1940s onwards, the ideological differences that split the Communist Party also widened the gap between socialist realism and realism. Bernard Smith cited his opposition to Cold War socialist realism as one of his reasons for leaving the Party in 1950. This was the conflicted background to *Australian Painting*: an embattled Marxist radicalism questioning itself; and three or four decades of nationalist literary theorising. Within neither framework had Indigenous art appeared except in the by-then disregarded Jindyworobak Movement, which Smith was aware of but dismissed.

[14] See Eric Dark, 'Political Bias of the Press', *Meanjin* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1948): 23–29.

[15] Letter by Joseph Burke to Clem Christesen, dated 25 October 1949, cited in Lynne Strahan, *Just City and the Mirrors: Meanjin Quarterly and the Intellectual Front, 1940–1965* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984), 124.

This was the background to *Australian Painting*'s linear idea of a unique national school of Australian art developing under the influence of innovations radiating from a metropolitan centre, an idea that seemed eminently plausible, but which explains why Smith did not see Aboriginal painting as Australian art, and why he obdurately did not question leaving Aboriginal painting to anthropologists. Instead, Smith described White painters developing Australian myths and legends like those that had appeared in literary criticism. In *Australian Painting*, settler society developed its own indigenous 'myths' about bushrangers like Ned Kelly, for instance, that were independent of the mythical traditions of Aboriginal people.

Australian Painting's intellectual conservatism was apparent to its reviewers in 1962, when the book was published, although none called Smith out on the lack of an Aboriginal presence. They saw a senior secondary school text, as prominent local Melbourne painter (and Smith's friend) John Brack explained in his severe review for *The Australian Book Review*. Brack found *Australian Painting* 'in turn brilliant, painstaking, careless and exasperating'.[16] Sydney painter Elwyn Lynn pinpointed the 'nationalistic expatriation that Dr Smith sees infusing Australia's art history', explaining that this meant 'recurring accounts of the effects of Australia's isolation, European influences and the heralded return of various expatriates'.[17] Lynn identified Smith's attempts 'to defend an undefined "indigenous tradition" [by which Lynn meant White painters not Indigenous] against 'currently fashionable overseas modes' [i.e. abstract painting] as simply a recapitulation of past, even atavistic narratives. He noted that Smith missed how similar his approach was to the lineage of patriotic, nationalist Australian art writing before him, which Smith ostensibly rejected.[18] Lynn was to become the Power Institute collection's curator a few years later and would be Smith's antagonist at the University of Sydney in the Power Institute, that university's much-contested new art history department and art collection where Smith was inaugural Chair.

Another history of Australian painting appeared shortly after *Australian Painting*, also codifying the mythology of a young nation's new artistic canon. Robert Hughes's book closely followed Smith's.[19] Hughes completed the manuscript for *The Art of Australia* in 1963 when he was a precocious twenty-four years old; the first edition was published in 1965 then withdrawn, reissued in 1966 and finally released in its familiar 1970 edition. His book is testament to the persuasive dominance of Smith's conception of Australian art history, echoing *Australian Painting*'s centre-to-periphery assumptions, although with Hughes's journalistic gift of snappy description.

---

[16] John Brack, 'Critic or Historian? Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1960* [review]', *Australian Book Review* 2, no. 1 (December 1962): 26.

[17] Elwyn Lynn, 'In Our Image; Bernard Smith: *Australian Painting, 1788–1960* [review]', *Nation*, 15 December 1962, 21–22, 21.

[18] Ibid., 21.

[19] Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970).

The same year *Australian Painting* was published, the monumental *Yirrkala Church Panels* (1962–63) were created at Yirrkala, near the tip of Australia's distant Top End. The panels are a diptych consisting of two large paintings, one depicting ancestral stories of the *Dhuwa* moiety and the other those of the *Yirritja* moiety. They were made by magisterially senior Yolŋu artists who lived and worked in north-east Arnhem Land and who came together from nine Dhuwa and seven Yirritja clans to collectively complete the project. Each clan's ancestral stories appear in a defined section of each panel, as Terry Smith recounts.[20] The left side of the diptych was painted under the direction of Mawalan Marika and the right-side panel by Birrikitji Gumana, both senior leaders and custodians. According to the leading anthropologist of the Yolŋu, Howard Morphy, whose writing does effortlessly cross the boundaries between anthropology and art history, Yolŋu artists have a long-standing desire to make collective visual statements that answer the legal question of their sovereignty as a people or nation and speak to the White nation. They 'decided how they would use their art in communicating with outsiders and how their sacred law could be presented in public contexts'.[21]

I am now going to emphasise the difference between artists and art historians. White Australian artists had admired Indigenous art for a long time. In 1948, the long list of expatriate Australian artists then resident in London all eagerly visited the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London to see an encyclopaedic exhibition comparing so-called Primitive and Modern art, and they were deeply impressed. The exhibition *40,000 Years of Modern Art* explicitly annexed Primitive art, including three examples of Australian Indigenous art, as modern art, not ancient culture. In the same years, Alice Springs became a mecca for Australian artists seeking a new vision of a national art. Many Melbourne and Sydney artists headed for the Red Centre: a trio of soon-to-be internationally renowned modernists, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, and Russell Drysdale; the more modestly acclaimed Lina Bryans and Jock Frater; enigmatic, mystic sculptor of Aboriginal themes William Ricketts; and Namatjira's mentor, watercolourist Rex Battarbee. Alan McCulloch, who was both an artist and an art critic, wrote positively of the modernism of Aboriginal art, as did Battarbee in his 1951 book, *Modern Australian Aboriginal Art*, although Battarbee's use of the word 'modern' simply denoted art made in the present, contrasting with McCulloch's use of the word to denote the modernist movement. In 1954, Melbourne painter Peter Graham who, along with Bernard Smith, had lived for extended periods at the turn of the 1950s in The Abbey Arts Centre at London's postwar green edge, rode his motorcycle to Alice Springs and stayed there for two years, working as a labourer, drawing and painting during the rest of his time. Graham was

---

20 Terry Smith, 'Marking Places, Cross-Hatching Worlds: The Yirrkala Church Panels', *E-Flux Journal* 111 (September 2020), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/111/345649/marking-places-cross-hatching-worlds-the-yirrkala-panels/ (accessed 1 May 2023).

21 Howard Morphy, 'Acting in a Community; Art and Social Cohesion in Indigenous Australia', *Humanities Research Journal* XV, no. 2 (2009): 115–31, 119.

fascinated by the mountainous desert. Trying to discover a contemporary artistic language to depict Aborigines, he became increasingly aware of the ethics of being a relatively privileged, albeit penurious, white visitor, frustrated by his inability to make any meaningful connection with local Indigenous people he tried to befriend. This was eight years before *Australian Painting* was published. He exhibited his Alice Springs paintings at the then immensely influential Gallery A in 1960, although they were ignored by critics and collectors. But shortly after, he had an artistic breakthrough, linking abstract expressionist automatism (spontaneous drawing from the unconscious mind) with a vocabulary of Indigenous-inspired ideograms in large, ambitious, calligraphic oil paintings such as *Cosmos*, 1961, and *The Waters of Lethe*, 1964. We should remember that these were the same years in which *Australian Painting* was written and published.

Artist-led attempts at transcultural communication – both by the Top End artists and by White artists including Peter Graham – would initially remain obscure and ignored, such was the exclusionary force of the new canon-making and the inertia of Australian art historians and most critics. Their lack of interest in such syntheses was symptomatic of a mindset that, in its historiographical form, could not see Aboriginal art as part of the nation's art history and which later, as we shall see in the postmodern purism of *Art & Text* writers, would question its motives. No transcultural history of Australian art was even considered, despite what a good number of artists were doing.

Environmental colour and late modernist painting

Almost a decade after the creation of both *Australian Painting* and the great *Yirrkala Church Panel*s, Terry Smith (no relation to Bernard) attempted to identify what he thought was the first genuinely new contribution to international art by Australian artists. The venue for his investigation was the pages of a new art magazine, *Other Voices*, that he and a group of Sydney painters jointly founded. Smith ventured that abstract painting made between the years 1966 and 1970 by artists associated with the inner-city, artist-run Central Street Gallery constituted an innovation of world importance that he labelled 'Color-Form Painting'.[22] If he was right, Australian artists would for once not be at the wrong end of cultural transfer. But then, towards the end of the essay, he abruptly and shockingly backtracked, pinpointing what he called his artist friends' 'failure', writing, 'the colors chosen are not only invariably *artificial* (that is, in no way environmental but based in an often-superficial knowledge of colour theory) but also *close in value*'.[23] This was his emphasis; the jargon was very much that of painters and critics in the 1960s and is little if ever used by contemporary artists today. Value means how light or dark a colour is, easily gauged by how a coloured image is transformed into black and white on

[22] Terry Smith, 'Color-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–1970', *Other Voices* 1, no. 1 (June–July 1970): 6–17, 6.
[23] Ibid., 13. Smith's emphasis.

a computer in Photoshop. By 'environmental' colour Smith was referring to a term used by his charismatic friend, Central Street painter Tony McGillick. McGillick and his friends rejected the earth colours observable in nature or the cluttered sandstone harbour city around them. Instead, fascinated by quintessentially 1960s artificial colours of neon lights, consumer packaging and Holden cars, they preferred colours sourced from reproductions, advertising and interior design. The trouble with their arbitrary relationship to colour was, Smith continued, 'that the paintings were often merely charming'.[24]

Cut to the exactly contemporaneous Papunya Tula paintings made in the remote community in the far-off centre of the Australian continent, yet unknown to the metropolitan Melbourne and Sydney artworld, at least until the later 1970s. Terry Smith would have found their use of colour 'environmental', certainly not artificial nor close in value. This is far more than a 'what-if' point, since it makes clear the specific artistic challenge to metropolitan abstract painting represented by what I will deliberately label Papunya artists' environmental colour: their use of a distinctive, relatively narrow range of earth colours, alternating with optical patterns and extremities of tonal relationships. Those very early Papunya Tula paintings were made by painters confident, as we know from John Kean and others who were there, that they were making ambitious contemporary art.[25] They, and their advisers, understood that their paintings were entering a very different discourse to that of study by anthropologists. They knew their pictures would circulate amongst metropolitan galleries, dealers and critics in the same way as works by White artists.

In the process of his definition of 'Color-Form', Smith was saying that the artists who created that style failed to successfully manipulate its core component (colour), and that their paintings were flawed as a result. He then defined what to look for in abstract painting's next step. There was, he insisted, a space to imagine an as-yet-perhaps-unnoticed school of painting that *did* constitute a disciplined avant-garde evading the high-modernist crimes of charm and kitsch. But such a remarkable and radical set of painting innovations had in fact already appeared a couple of decades earlier, in the late 1950s, in the form of Yolŋu bark paintings; they even became a minor interior design sensation in the early 1960s. From the late 1950s, Czech modernist artist-curator Karel Kupka collected and exhibited Yolŋu barks.[26] At the Art Gallery of New South

---

[24] Ibid.

[25] For a first-hand account of early 1970s Papunya artists, in particular their self-awareness about making ambitious art, see John Kean (who was a young art advisor at Papunya), 'Dot, Circle and Frame: How Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Tim Leura, Clifford Possum and Johnny Warangula Created Papunya Tula Art' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2020).

[26] See Karel Kupka, *Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), originally *Un Art a l'Etat Brut. Peintures et Sculptures des Aborigenes d'Australie* (Lausanne: La Guilde du Livre, 1962). Kupka predicted, 'today is the golden age for Aboriginal plastic arts … their disappearance is inexorably drawing near' (166), a sentiment consistent with the tendency then to imagine the end of Aboriginal culture; see Nicholas Rothwell, 'The Collector: Karel Kupka in North Australia', *The Monthly* (October 2007), https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2007/october/1281338813/nicolas-rothwell/collector#mtr (accessed 1 May 2023).

Wales, curator-artist Tony Tuckson presented similar works from Oenpelli and Melville, and Bathurst Island in new installations within the permanent collection display. He also prepared a major touring exhibition of Aboriginal art in 1960–61 that attracted reviews mentioning its resonance with modern art. Alan McCulloch, reviewing Tuckson's innovative display, made exactly this point. We can see that there were increasing challenges to the idea that Indigenous painting belonged to the domain of anthropology and not art (of course it could be seen through both lenses).

So, in the centre and north of Australia during the period preceding and coinciding with *Other Voices*, Aboriginal artists were making artistically and politically radical answers to abstract painting's late 1960s crisis regarding the survival of figuration, a crisis manifest in art critic Terry Smith's concerns about 'environmental colour', tonal value and 'charm'. They had independently forged a new synthesis of environmental abstract painting and Indigenous iconicity that was outside the capacity of the Color-Form painters. The importance of Aboriginal artists' innovations was not yet recognised. No art historians or critics, not Bernard Smith or Terry Smith, were thinking about them in the early 1970s, although a few collectors were already bowled over. Papunya Tula's immense significance to the history of late modernist painting was not yet discussed. It was for now invisible to art historians.

But we can see that this was an alternative vision of Australian abstract art to that of the internationalist space of Color-Form painting. And, as Terry Smith admitted, Color-Form painting was in crisis: the differences between 1950s high modernist painting's formalism and 1960s late modernist art were increasing each year, as artists moved away from painting into happenings, performances, installations, and deskilled documentary photography. That was crippling for Color-Form painters, but it did not affect the Aboriginal painters at Papunya.

I am not sidelining the fact that the Papunya painters were incorporating long local histories of aesthetic experiment in the face of ongoing oppression. Their then relatively unknown 1970s paintings possessed extraordinary social, cultural and religious dimensions as well as explosive aesthetic charge. Nonetheless, their paintings were solutions to artistic (and even, via Papunya schoolteacher and experimental filmmaker Geoff Bardon, to alternative cinema's) problems, solutions arrived at by the senior artists themselves while experimenting with multiple visual languages and several types of physical painting support, one after another, very deliberately. These Indigenous artists had seized the materials of Color-Form – the acrylic paint, the cotton canvas support, the Masonite and, quickly, within a couple of years, the sheer size, painted next on Belgian linen. To sum up, both Color-Form and Indigenous paintings from the Top End and the Western Desert were being made around 1971, and the

---

Also see Howard Morphy, 'Coming to Terms with Aboriginal Art in the 1960s', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 153–67.

Indigenous artists had a substantial pre-history of artistic experiment no less substantial than that of the Sydney artists.

The purpose of this article has not been to 'explain' Indigenous painting as abstract art. That would be a facile mistake and would end up with the paintings seen as belated. It is to point to its substantial absence from important art criticism and art history in 1962 and then in 1970. Accounts of Indigenous art were almost exclusively published by a very small number of anthropologists, Ronald Berndt in particular, who saw contemporary Indigenous paintings as representative of traditional Indigenous culture rather than as modern or contemporary art. The rare, partial exception was Tuckson's prescient 1964 essay 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', included in Berndt's book, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, in which Tuckson famously argued that Indigenous paintings should be seen as distinctive works of art.[27] He rehearsed British art theorist Herbert Read's universalising theories about modernist paintings' diverse abstract languages. Tuckson wrote, 'this art is, I believe, conceptual, subjective and symbolic', adding that, 'this is not always the opinion of the anthropologist', a wariness returned by his anthropologist editor, Berndt, who emphasised severe reservations about Tuckson's annexation of Aboriginal paintings for art museums in the first, semi-hostile paragraphs of the essay following Tuckson's, even though his own Epilogue credits individual Aboriginal artists by name rather than traditionally attributing artworks to their community.[28] In 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', Tuckson was explaining from a modernist perspective that Aboriginal paintings were easily seen as modern art; even so, he did not seek to place them as of their moment and attuned to the times (by which I mean in tune with the end-of-modernism moment that Tuckson's own gestural abstract paintings occupied), nor did he establish what their innovations were within late modernist Australian painting. In retrospect we see that neither 1960s bark paintings from Oenpelli and Yirrkala, nor early 1970s Western Desert paintings from Papunya, nor the exactly contemporaneous Color-Form paintings from Sydney, were belated by comparison with international art.

Not seeing Indigenous art as late modern art had been wrong. On the one hand, Bernard Smith and, on the other hand, Ronald Berndt had inadvertently underestimated the agency and originality of Indigenous painters and, equally importantly, their acquaintance with other potentially available artistic languages. As for their individual agency, Top End Bark painters actively negotiated the complexities of the traditional ownership of images; multiple art communities' most senior painters deliberately came together for the

[27] See Ronald Berndt, ed., *Australian Aboriginal Art* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964); Ure Smith was *Art and Australia*'s publisher; also see A.P. Elkin, Catherine Berndt, and Ronald Berndt, *Art in Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1950); those anthropologists wrote about art to explain traditional Aboriginal culture. Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) curator–painter Tony Tuckson wrote his essay, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', for Berndt's 1964 book cited above, 60–68.

[28] Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', 60; Berndt expresses queasiness about Tuckson's claims in that book's 'Epilogue' (69–74).

Church Panels. Vivien Johnson has explained a similar history of negotiation and experimentation at Papunya: the first Papunya paintings emerged from a pre-history of trial and error, of experimentation with crafts and with traditional landscape painting, most obviously with Albert Namatjira's watercolour paintings of Central Australian landscapes. She has traced the radical decisions set in place in the early 1970s over a couple of years or more of self-critique and group discussion, with considerable dissension and initial disapproval from many senior members of other Desert communities.[29]

We can see that we must pay more attention to the timeline of Aboriginal painting alongside that of White Australian art. From this we can then insist on the timeliness of, first, Yolŋu bark painting and, then, Western Desert painting as independently arrived-at artistic solutions that were simultaneously faced at the same time (as we saw with Terry Smith's critique of Color-Form painting) by abstractionists in Sydney and Melbourne. But neither Australian Color-Form painting around 1971 nor Western Desert painting of that moment could be adequately explained either by the already stale art theories, questioned by young artists and writers alike, of American formalist critic Clement Greenberg and his local acolytes, the best known of which was *The Age*'s art critic, Patrick McCaughey, or by the symbols and myths that Bernard Smith valorised in Sidney Nolan's first *Ned Kelly* paintings of 1946–47.[30] Quite quickly, by the mid-1970s, both tendencies would be equally derided by younger artists and writers, including Terry Smith.

I have argued, so far, that writing on art by scholars from the emergent discipline of Australian art history from 1962 to 1988 was limited in its grasp of where art made in Australia (as opposed to Australian art) was produced, except in Melbourne and Sydney. This was White man's art and White man's art history. Terry Smith followed his pessimistic 1970 evaluation of Color-Form with a famous essay, 'The Provincialism Problem' (1974), which explained the bind of being an ambitious artist working in the provinces of Melbourne and Sydney far from New York, putatively the exclusive locus of artistic innovation.[31] That essay explained artists' strategies to overcome the disadvantages of distance, but as yet did not arrive at an understanding that artists, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, were part of a broad international contemporary art, no matter how apparently local the signifiers. Aboriginal art remained invisible in Terry Smith's essay, which was written in the years of the first, little-noticed Papunya painting exhibitions in Sydney and Melbourne and long after the more widespread diffusion of Yolŋu bark painting.[32]

Eventually, *Australian Painting* was very cautiously directed through a crucial update for the third edition in 1991 when Terry Smith was invited to write a long

[29] Vivien Johnson, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri* (Sydney: Gordon and Breach Arts International, 1994).

[30] See Patrick McCaughey, 'The Significance of The Field', *Art and Australia* 6, no. 3 (December 1968): 235–42; McCaughey approved of Color-Form painting as the 'alignment of Australian art with the modernist tradition' (235).

[31] Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum* 13, no. 1 (September 1974): 54–59.

postscript at Bernard Smith's invitation. The revised book conformed to the increasingly eccentric idea that art history could be written by excluding all other media except painting. Up to then, most readers would have thought Australian painting was Australian art. After the 1970s, that was obviously untrue. And the misguided view that Aboriginal painting should not be included in a national art history on the grounds that it belonged exclusively to the domain of anthropology, not art history, was urgently remedied with Terry Smith's key 1991 chapter properly integrating Indigenous painting as Australian painting, a major pivot for the book that reflected the revelation that Terry Smith had experienced when he visited Indigenous art centres, an eye-opening experience that he developed quickly in a series of essays.[33] From the revelation of Papunya painting, he was to arrive at a new theory of contemporaneity in which artists were contemporary if they were working with postnational issues such as feminism, postcolonialism, transculturation, and the understanding that art is always embedded within its geopolitical context, especially in the Global South – as Indigenous painting was.[34]

Antipodality and postmodernism

To explain why it had become obvious that *Australian Painting* would need to be revised in this way, we need to understand that well before then, Western Desert painting was finally gaining attention as contemporary art rather than anthropological heritage. As before, artists led the way. In 1979, overseas artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay, German artist Nikolaus Lang, and London artist collective Boyle Family came to Australia for the Third Biennale of Sydney, visiting the Outback that year and on repeat visits. Lang and the Boyle Family separately recorded and painstakingly copied the strata and textures of the red landscape, preoccupied by Aboriginal culture. Lang's works attracted negative criticism from art critic Gary Catalano, who wrote that 'his works trespass on the terrain of a host of other disciplines – among them geology, anthropology, geography and archaeology – and effectively trivialise both their objects of inquiry and their procedures'.[35] Conceptual artist Tim Johnson and his then partner, academic Vivien Johnson, visited Alice Springs in 1978. Entranced by the Papunya Tula paintings they saw (and purchased), they garnered permission to visit Papunya itself in 1980, the same year that conceptualist performance

---

[32] 'Provincialism Problem' appeared two years after Sandra Le Brun Holmes's book, *Yirawala: Artist and Man* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1972), two years before the Sydney-based art journal *Art and Australia*'s special issue, 'Australian Aboriginal Art', of January 1976.

[33] Terry Smith, 'Aboriginal Art: Its Genius Explained', *The Independent Monthly* (September 1989): 18–19; 'Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings & Prints by Jennifer Isaacs', *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (1990): 63–65; 'Aboriginal Art Now: Writing Its Variety and Vitality', in *Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1990: From Australia*, Australia Council exhibition catalogue (Glasgow: Third Eye Centre, 1990), 3–14.

[34] Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[35] Gary Catalano, 'A Trespasser Confronts an Unlikely Hero', *The Age*, 31 May 1989, 14.

artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay also ventured beyond Alice Springs in search of the spiritual and artistic mentors they hoped to find in remote Indigenous communities.[36] As well as the dot paintings that Tim Johnson developed with Papunya artists' full permission after his visit, there were Melbourne sculptor John Davis's bush assemblages and Sydney conceptualist Imants Tillers's first canvas boards. Davis's sculptures were spreading arrangements of twigs tied together with cotton, partly covered with papier-mâché, calico cloth, latex, and bituminous paint. *Continuum and Transference*, 1978, the installation that Davis presented at the 1978 Venice Biennale as one of three artists representing Australia the year that Australia returned to the Biennale after a couple of decades' petulant absence, spread with a centripetal slowness that suggested Indigenous landscapes.[37] In the exhibition catalogue, critic Norbert Loeffler wrote that Aboriginal art had become one of Davis's sources, and that *Continuum and Transference* was a celebration of natural cycles.[38] He referred to the belated discovery of Aboriginal art by an increasing number of local artists. Davis himself at different moments played this down, sometimes flirting with the idea of a distinctive Australian identification with the land but more often not: in a 1985 artist statement for an Adelaide exhibition he wrote, 'The work I make is formal and structured like a Western artist's. It hasn't got the feeling of myth and ritual that Aboriginal art has'.[39] Even when this non-ironic white Aboriginality attracted a degree of international attention, for instance in the contemporary art journal, *Art and America* in a then widely read although now very dated 1981 overview of contemporary Australian art by visiting American art critic Suzi Gablik, it soon became clear that international interest was really going to turn to Aboriginal painting itself, not to white Aboriginality.[40]

Art museums responded more slowly. In 1980, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's great painting, *Man's Love Story* (1978), was featured in the new reinstallation of contemporary Australian art at the Art Gallery of South Australia; the same year, Tim and Vivien Johnson curated *Papunya Tula: Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* at Macquarie University. In 1981, young curator Bernice Murphy famously included three great Papunya Tula paintings in the first *Australian Perspecta*, a milestone biennial survey of contemporary Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. By contrast, the National Gallery of Victoria's large 1981 exhibition, *Aboriginal Australia*, remained completely cordoned off from the Gallery's displays of contemporary art.

---

[36] For Tim and Vivien Johnson's 1980 Papunya visit see Donna Leslie, *Spiritual Journeying: The Art of Tim Johnson* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2019), 30–33.

[37] Daniel Thomas, curator and ed., *Venice Biennale 1978: From Nature to Art, from Art to Nature, John Davis, Robert Owen, Ken Unsworth*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Visual Arts Board, Australia Council, 1978).

[38] Norbert Loeffler, 'John Davis', in Thomas, 5.

[39] John Davis, artist's statement, *Singular and Plural*, exhibition catalogue (Adelaide: South Australian School of Art Gallery, 1985), not paginated.

[40] Suzi Gablik, 'Report from Australia', *Art in America* (January 1981): 29–37.

Even then, the shattering impact of postmodernism upon the Australian art world in 1981, especially through the influential, small-circulation art journal *Art & Text*, did not mean that postmodern writers accepted Indigenous art as credible contemporary Australian art. Although *Art & Text*'s charismatic editor Paul Taylor orchestrated a distinctive new theoretical framework for Australian art, his postmodernism was drawn from Continental philosophy that was largely blind and sometimes actively hostile to the concurrent emergence of contemporary Aboriginal art. In 'Antipodality', a special section of *Art & Text 6* (Winter 1982), Taylor emphasised that Australian art was neither international nor national art: it could stand in for art from anywhere (that is, it quoted from all art) and was therefore multinational.[41] To support this claim, 'Antipodality' gathered essays by painter Imants Tillers and literary theorists Meaghan Morris and Paul Foss to argue that the problem of 'Australia' was not one of geography and origins, but of texts and textuality. The first essay was by Tillers.[42] This was 'Locality Fails', now often quoted by Australian art historians. Tillers began by explaining how Australian artists and writers – and international visitors – had attempted to create an 'Indigenous' Australian art by incorporating aspects of Aboriginal art and culture into their work. And many white Australian artists and writers had been attempting to construct solutions to the provincial bind that Terry Smith had pinpointed. Some were now identifying with a so-called Dreaming in landscapes of quasi-anthropological traces, attempting a cross-cultural link with Aboriginality not completely dissimilar to the artists we described before from the 1950s. Tillers warned that future overseas interest would be in Aboriginal art, not in transcultural art from White Australia. He argued that synthetic incorporation could never succeed because 'locality fails' (the title of his essay). Almost fantastically, he based his argument against a distinctive Australian contemporary art marked by national transcultural symbolism and tied to a particular Australian time and place on a scientific theory, Bell's Theorem (1964). Bell's Theorem, emerging from the domain of quantum physics, showed that either the statistical predictions of quantum theory or the principle of local causes was false. This meant, according to Tillers, that the development of genuinely local art was not possible. Even where obvious contact had not taken place, regional art would be *seen* as influenced by metropolitan art.

The wide suspicion by postmodern writers about the apparently new Aboriginal painting should be remembered, especially the scathing distrust expressed by key *Art & Text* artist-writer Juan Davila, fuelled by the first exhibitions of Papunya painting at irredeemably neo-bohemian venues that he despised like ROAR Studios in Melbourne. That artist-run gallery, marked by the neo-expressionism and primitivism of its founders who were open to Outsider art and some of whom would later freelance as Indigenous art centre assistants, was rented out

[41] Paul Taylor, 'Introduction. Special Section: Antipodality', *Art & Text*, no. 6 (Winter 1982): 49.
[42] Imants Tillers, 'Locality Fails', *Art & Text*, no. 6 (Winter 1982): 51–60.

to art dealer Gabrielle Pizzi to show Papunya Tula paintings.[43] Davila eventually wrote a searing assessment of the emergent Western Desert painting phenomenon for *Art & Text* in 1987, criticising Imants Tillers's and Tim Johnson's interest in an art he saw as tainted money and aesthetically conservative. A couple of years later cultural studies theorists Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis mounted a savage attack on similar grounds for *Art in America*.[44] This was changing, though, with the much-publicised Bicentennial year.

1988: Admitting the necessity of Australian art

Around the Bicentennial year, writing on Aboriginal art by white art historians and curators started to appear in earnest and Indigenous painters attracted public reverence. The 1988 Australian Bicentennial signalled a widespread resurgence of interest in defining Australian national identity at the same time as theorists of subcultures explained that the appropriation of the images and icons of minority groups and their struggles were being recuperated gradually into art museums and art history. In other words, 1988 was the end, not the beginning, of the definition of a singular national Australian art. This was clear first in the efflorescence of identity and postcolonial art in the years following the Bicentenary. So, Indigenous art belatedly found a positive place on the pages of the later *Art & Text* from 1988 on as it had not in earlier issues.[45] But during those years, artist-writers Ian Burn and Nigel Lendon, and art historian-curators Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, were together patiently drafting a book that would become a nail in the coffin of the idea of Australian art that had been slowly constructed with difficulty and against fierce disagreement from Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* in 1962 on.

Published in 1988 although written a few years before, their book was titled *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation*.[46] Burn and his co-authors argued that art historians had patently failed to account for art made in Australia and they refused the arboreal model of artistic growth from the North Atlantic trunk to distant branches that earlier writers, especially Bernard Smith, assumed. The book challenged the thesis of *Australian Painting* that, they contended, had remained the dominant account of Australian art despite being unable to account for much. Specifically, they explained that Smith had 'established a way of looking at and evaluating Australian art in terms of its dependency upon European, and English or American work'. They rejected

[43] Juan Davila, 'Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game', *Art & Text*, nos. 23–24 (March–May 1987), 53–56.

[44] Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, 'Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?', *Art in America* (July 1989): 108–63; also see the furious response by Roger Benjamin, 'Aboriginal Art: Exploitation or Empowerment?', *Art in America* (July 1990): 73–81.

[45] A first instance of this shift is Nicholas Baume, 'The Interpretation of Dreamings: The Australian Aboriginal Acrylic Movement', *Art & Text*, no. 33 (1989): 110–20.

[46] Ian Burn et al., *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988).

his argument that Australian art was primarily shaped by such international influence.[47] In effect, they argued that although Smith's *Australian Painting* had expanded the public understanding of Australian art, it constructed Australian art history within a framework of dependency. This meant that Smith's model pioneered seeing Australian art in terms of exodus, dependency, and reaction to English, European, and American art – in other words, in terms of a cultural transfer from North Atlantic art. This 'inhibiting power of the interpretation' had resulted in a 'process of cultural devaluation' that Burn and his co-authors set out to address.[48]

In a carefully constructed, intricate argument, they explained that the idea of cultural dependency and transfer that seemed logical when it was formulated in the early 1960s was no longer useful. Instead, Australian landscape art was especially significant because it reflected the settler-invader relationship with the land, moving from invasion and appropriation to a focus on imagining regional locations and from there to a symbolism that embodied a national cultural identity. On the one hand, their eloquent short book continued the Australian Left's Cold War attempt to reconcile nationalism with sophisticated cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, Burn, Lendon, Merewether, and Stephen developed an ingenious critical framework for looking at other types of art made in Australia that circumvented the centre–periphery dialectic by explaining the regional specificity of globalising processes (their 'peripheral capitalist formation'). This mouthful of words uncannily doubled *Art & Text*'s appeal to subcultures' self-sufficiency. But Burn and his friends argued something deeper: that

> An alternate interpretation of Australian art should be able to reveal the interdependent (not dependent) character of the relations between centre and periphery, in such a way that it is possible to glimpse through Australian art an alternative interpretation of twentieth century art.[49]

Describing Bernard Smith's emphasis on dependency, they dismissed it as an 'ideological construction' that was no longer relevant.[50] In fact, they suggested, this was the escape route from the inescapable provincialism problem. *The Necessity of Australian Art* was to become deeply influential in the 1990s. It was significant in sweeping aside the idea of Australian art that had been so powerfully set in motion by Bernard Smith's history of Australian painting. Their modest book was ultimately more influential than Paul Taylor's glamorous essays. But even it was about to be subsumed by new understandings about Indigenous art, new histories that Burn and his friends were aware of but initially reluctant to follow.

For even though Burn and his friends grasped that Indigenous art was embodying modernity in appropriating codes and languages, they still responded suspiciously. They were writing in strong support of the still unfashionable

47 Ibid., 8.
48 Ibid., 8–9.
49 Ibid., 132.
50 Ibid., 7.

Aranda watercolour painter Albert Namatjira but were antagonistic to the Western Desert painting because the latter was now being promoted in the art market and in the popular media as an extension of the modernist trajectory of abstract painting, as redundant as Color-Form. Burn and his friends saw the hand of the market in Indigenous painting's increasing prestige.[51] Given their powerful narration of how White settlers' relationship to the land was based on ownership and the exclusion of Indigenous peoples, it was unexpected that they did not bring Top End or Western Desert painting into their reformulation of Australian art history or suggest that Indigenous artists would play a stronger role in the more recent (and, we know, contemporaneous) renegotiation of regionalist art, for both were topics completely in tune with their proposed revision of Australian art history. This was particularly striking given how powerfully Burn's and Stephen's essays on Namatjira had demonstrated their deep sympathy with Indigenous land rights.[52]

By 1988, the efflorescence of Aboriginal art from the Top End, the Western Desert and across the continent was finally widely celebrated, including in the 1988 Biennale of Sydney that Nick Waterlow curated. The catalogue featured a major essay by Burn setting out a geo-cultural framework different to the standard Museum of Modern Art atlas of North Atlantic art, instead taking up the call of *Necessity* and re-imagining Australian art's participation in a global history of art.[53] An overwhelmingly positive response to Aboriginal art gathered pace rapidly. It swept aside the national story of Australian art that writers had so carefully constructed in the preceding three decades. This led some, for instance Terry Smith, as we have seen, to alter their ideas profoundly. It pushed others, including Bernard Smith and Patrick McCaughey, into the optimistic idea of cultural convergence.[54]

Meanwhile, another phenomenon gathered force, hastened by the global financial downturn that started shortly after 1988. This was the globalisation of the art world and the related ascendancy of contemporaneity, a condition that Terry Smith was the first to map from the late 1990s onwards. It was enabled by the global Third Wave of biennials, triennials, and documentas during the 1990s and by that decade's internationalisation of the art market. A younger generation of artists, curators, gallerists, and writers insisted instead

[51] Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, 'The Transfiguration of Albert Namatjira', *The Age Monthly Review* (November 1986), republished in Ian Burn, *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 52–66, 62.

[52] See Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, 'Namatjira's White Mask: A Partial Interpretation', in *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolorists of Central Australia*, ed. Jane Hardy, J.V.S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1992), 249–82.

[53] Ian Burn, 'The Re-Appropriation of Influence', in *Australian Biennale 1988: From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c. 1940–1988*, exhibition catalogue, Nick Waterlow (curator) (Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, 1988), 41–48.

[54] See Bernard Smith, 'On Cultural Convergence' (1986), in *The Death of the Artist as Hero: Essays in History and Culture* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 289–302; on cultural convergence between Indigenous and White art see Patrick McCaughey, *Strange Country: Why Australian Painting Matters* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2014); Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 2015).

on a global narrative of art made around the world, by First Nations artists and Australian Aboriginal artists in particular. The rapidly evolving framework of international biennials and triennials became sites for thinking about postcolonial and postnational ideas.

All this remained incomprehensible to powerful scholars in North America and Western Europe. Many of us have stories to tell about famous visiting international scholars and their patronising indifference to locally made art. If art history's terms of value were formulated in the North Atlantic, then attempts to think of other centres as equal seemed to them to cut off the reasons for valuing quality. A defence of quality now served as an effort to reinforce hegemony.

Back to Australian art. This article has demonstrated that the need to decide what was 'Australian' in art history meant Indigenous art was once excluded as unnecessary. Even our greatest art historian avoided writing about Aboriginal artists. A sudden absence of 'necessity', of determined progress, haunted art historians as they confronted the modifications required to create an art history of Australia if Indigenous art was included: an art history without necessity. An alternative intellectual framework to the need for a national school of Australian art would be belatedly and very slowly established as the necessity of Australian art was jettisoned. This is a whole other story that has yet to be told.

ORCID

Charles Green http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-4625

Charles Green
University of Melbourne
Email: c.green@unimelb.edu.au