

Australian Aboriginal Art

Patrick Hutchings

To attack one's neighbours, to pass or to crush and subdue more remote peoples without provocation and solely for the thirst for dominion—what is one to call it but brigandage on a grand scale?¹

The City of God, St Augustine of Hippo, IV Ch 6

'The natives are extremely fond of painting and often sit hours by me when at work'²

Thomas Watling

The Australians and the British began their relationship by 'dancing together', so writes Inge Clendinnen in her multi-voiced *Dancing With Strangers*³ which weaves contemporary narratives of Sydney Cove in 1788. The event of dancing is witnessed to by a watercolour by Lieutenant William Bradley, 'View in Broken Bay New South Wales March 1788', which is reproduced by Clendinnen as both a plate and a dustcover.⁴ By 'The Australians' Clendinnen means the Aboriginal population. But, of course, Aboriginality is not an Aboriginal concept but an Imperial one. As Sonja Kurtzer writes: 'The concept of Aboriginality did not even exist before the coming of the European'.⁵ And as for the *terra nullius* to which the British came, it was always a legal fiction. All this taken in, one sees why Clendinnen calls the First People 'The Australians', leaving most of those with the current passport very much Second People. But: winner has taken, almost, all. The Eddie Mabo case⁶ exploded *terra nullius*, but most of the 'nobody's land' now still belongs to the Second People. And 'Sorry Day', May 26, is a sorry event, most years.

1. Enlightenment and Empathy

The bi-coloured dance which began 'Australian' history was perhaps a function of pure natural empathy: 'man is a political animal', and encounters may begin in politeness; or, in childlike cordiality. But

Clendinnen's splendid book chronicles, by assembling writings of the time, in the new Colony, which indicate how little the Second People came to understand of the First. And as to the 'ring-around-the-rosey', Clendinnen writes, 'What can this mysterious "dancing together" have looked like? Rollicking British hornpipes, followed by elegant Australian knee-lifts? Wild hoppings and leapings from some cultural no-mans land?'⁷ It must have worked either cross-culturally, or as a set of 'wild hoppings and leapings', disordinate. If it looked cross-cultural, it may well have been the first and last cross-cultural aesthetic event, in Sydney Cove until very recent times.

Commander Arthur Phillip who led the first white settlement in Australian seems to have been a humane man—Clendinnen has him 'close to a visionary'⁸—one who sought to understand the Australians, but failed. Read Clendinnen for the account of both his quest for understanding, and its disappointment, little by little. A chorus of sad, white Colonial voices.

As a man of the Enlightenment, Phillip would have believed in the solidarity of the human race, and sought, thus, to have understood the Australians. As servant of an Imperium which considered itself benign, he would have been in duty bound to attempt understanding. But with *terra nullius* in his portfolio he would have been hindered in his understanding, not only by his limitations as an anthropologist, but by the *bad faith* into which he was cast both by *terra nullius* itself, and by the project of founding a penal settlement. Phillip could not as an Imperial Agent afford to understand, even if his heart was engaged, and even if he had been a better reader of the customs of the local Australians than he was. To put it shortly: Empire is not in the first instance a cross-cultural project; and though Clendinnen writes 'the British [1788] had no awareness of possible conflict over land'⁹, they ought to have had. After Ireland and India, such false consciousness was absurd.

The policy of the English in Ireland was not to produce Jonathan Swift, Bishop Berkley, through to James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, and Seamus Heaney. All this was unintended. What was intended is that none of these great writers would become famous for their writing in Irish: the language was proscribed. The Irish Republic is now a largely English-speaking, Westminster-style, social democracy, whose passports

in two languages are not entirely readable by all their bearers. And it's not the English that most have difficulty with.

New Zealand too has bi-lingual passports. Australia has not.

Founded/'founded' in 1788 a year before the Enlightenment's sharp end, the French Revolution, 'Australia' was never an Enlightenment project. Nor was it one—apart from that first dancing moment—a project of empathy. Actually to understand what the Australians feel for the land, their song-lines at once hymns and mental maps, is something that would have been utterly incompatible with the project of Imperium. Empires take land, destroy cultures: the English do this with a bland air of benevolence.

2. *Aboriginal Painting: Contexts of Cosmology and Catastrophe*

In one sense there is *no* problem with the aesthetics of Aboriginal painting. Australia's first International Art Movement is known in Europe and America at least as well as it is here. It has its *connoisseurs*. Aboriginal Art produces works of transcendent beauty, boldness, complexity, simplicity, sophistication. Criticism of it lags after it. Over two hundred language and iconographic systems stand behind Aboriginal Art. It is complex: it is splendid. Most of the problems about it are the result of its problematization, a problematization which from the 'Black' side is function of (post) Colonial social fact, and from the 'White' arises from a lack of knowledge, and from uncertain sentiment.

Professor Marcia Langton is mildly caustic about people who buy Aboriginal art as 'interior decoration'.¹⁰ Well, many of us do. But I also use some of my collection as meditation objects. They can even be read philosophically.¹¹ This said, there remain problems, of an inter-cultural sort. Some political issues haunt—mere—aesthetics.

Aboriginal Painting which is most often a mapping of the sacred but alienated land and an account of its landforms—a *little cosmology*—can not be read on its own terms. We can neither understand, nor even afford to understand, land-paintings even as we buy them as aesthetic objects. The Dreamings which the paintings map are not *our* Dreamings: and even for the painters they may be all but shattered. Reconciliation—a settlement of land-issues—is a long way off, and is not on the present Government's agenda. What Clendinnen writes

about Phillip's usurpation of Sydney Cove sets the whole pattern: 'Phillip's usurpation of Sydney Cove with its small but reliable water supply and its grassy spaces, the features which had led him to select the site, had excluded the Australians from reliably accessible water and good hunting grounds'.¹² Their song-lines faltered: and in the end the Australians were left, by and large, with what the Imperium did not want: and it wanted more than Sydney. And so without the sacred land, relationship to which defined their whole culture, the Aboriginals were left bereft. About 30,000 years of Aboriginal culture all but collapsed when confronted by a culture of bilge-tainted Englishness.

3. *'The Other' Answers Us Back (And in Academic English)*

In a recent collection of essays by Aboriginal intellectuals called *Blacklines*,¹³ claims are made to a peculiar and not-necessarily-share-able Aboriginal epistemology, rather more than 'a way of seeing' but a way-of-seeing-and-being, which is cut off by the Primal Scene at Sydney Cove 1788, the place where British and Aboriginal people briefly danced on a *terra nullius*.

The Enlightenment itself—of which the Australians have not seen much—is called into question, by Ian Anderson in the 'Introduction to *Blacklines*. He questions it epistemologically:

...it should not be presumed that any single Indigenous writer would necessarily want to adopt an identity defined by 'western' traditions of the 'west'. Rather, what has developed is a common interest in building a set of critical arguments about 'western' ways of knowing. In fact, as I have suggested, some Aboriginal writers would argue that it is not the case that all things can be 'known'. *Some truths simply may not be reachable, no matter how deeply we dig with tools provided by 'western' thinking since the 'enlightenment'. For non Aboriginal people, this may mean that some things about Aboriginal people and life-ways will always remain unintelligible.*¹⁴

"The enlightenment" is in shudder quotes. Understandably. Another writer, Martin Nakata, says: 'the critical humanist's agenda [in 'anthro-

pology' etc] ... inevitably becomes a sort of regulatory device for disciplining the [Aboriginal person or] the Torres Strait Islander'.¹⁵

In a critique of a debate between the anthropologist and feminist Diane Bell and Jackie Huggins about issues of rape in contemporary Aboriginal society, Aileen Moreton-Robinson introduces the fashionable but unsettling notion of *incommensurability*. The text reads:

The Huggins-Bell debate speaks to central issues within feminism about irreducible differences, *incommensurabilities* and white race privilege. The subject position 'white woman' as the representation of true womanhood has been constituted historically and was deployed to position Huggins et al. in particular ways, largely as unacademic but also as not traditional—meaning 'authentic'—Indigenous women. This subject position is embodied in various forms of feminist agency and is socially empowered because it has a structural location within *the hegemony of whiteness*.¹⁶

Into the rape issue we cannot go here. But the passage is generally instructive: and ominous. If indeed Aboriginal and Settler epistemologies and concepts are incommensurable, then the cross-cultural dialogue is not, quite, possible. At the moral-political level this is extremely disquieting.

If our dancing partners declare themselves to be inscrutable, we, further, put them into a double bind: making them change while not letting them change.

Writing of 'Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation', (Essay 9 in *Blacklines*), Professor Marcia Langton cites the anthropologist John von Sturmer. This is the passage:

...a description [as under the Idea of an 'anthropological myth of vanished worlds'] relates to the ethnocidal tendencies of colonialist capitalism, the destruction of indigenous cultures through Western impact. However what it excludes is the recognition of culture as dynamic and the transformation of cultures through interaction. The category of *primitive art* is premised on the notion of some pure Other which has been

or is being tainted by Western influence. In effect the very possibility of collection primitive art signals the end of the possibility of its production.¹⁷

In a paper read to the first Pacific Rim Conference I talked of mutually misunderstood—possibly mutually unintelligible—*forms of life*. The von Sturmer line seems to be that we have a stalemate of intelligibility as between two forms of life. One form is supposed to stand still: the other to go on. But even if both go on, do we reach reconciliation with ‘Australians’? Can we dance together again as we first did? Aboriginal belief systems seem to ‘us’ inscrutable: *plus* a reading of them in good faith was/is rendered impossible by the bad faith of Sydney Cove 1788. To which is added possibly the—standard Post-modern—position that: incommensurabilities are unavoidable: ‘There is no position-from-which other positions and their claims can be impartially judged’.

Certainly universal ethical reason as postulated by Kant, ‘Act only on that principle that you can at the same time will to be a universal law’, is not above criticism. This I mentioned in my last paper, and struggled with in a monograph which I wrote thirty years ago on ‘Kant on Absolute Value’.¹⁸

It is *not* I—unfashionably—think the case that there is no near-God’s-eye-Reason: there *is*, but as a Regulative Idea. There are always Utilitarian, Cultural, Pragmatic difficulties in the applying of it, and so of the Categorical Imperative. Incommensurabilities are ‘set us as a task’ to overcome by shared discourse: discourse in a real polity, should one ever emerge. *However*, Governor Phillip had he read Kant, could not have even played with, ‘act only on that principle which you could will to become a universal law’. His Imperative was of, and from, the Imperium: Establish a convict settlement: let the usual land-grabbers, in due course, in. The result is the destruction, or at the very least a great disruption, of cultures on the ground which suddenly find that they have no ground to be on. The Australians under *terra nullius* could oddly be illegally hunter-gathering and ‘going walkabout’ (odious phrase), on ground which under that fiction they never were on in the first place. They were nobody, because their land to them at once useful and sacred belonged now, under laws which they could not understand, to the white ghosts from the sailing ships. White ghosts whose assump-

tion was that *they*, the Australians, would stay just as found, when this very possibility had been destroyed by the same Settlers who had this expectation of the ‘changeless primitive’.

4. *Aboriginal Art ‘The Hegemony of Modernism’*

It is a commonplace that Modernism was influenced by such things as the objects in the *Musée d’Homme*, in Paris, and the simple frescos in the little Catalan churches. From these Modernism created a clutch of *styles* through which we have now come to read Aboriginal Inuit, etc, etc, art. The style-set gets called ‘Abstraction’ or ‘Modernism’. Like Kant’s blue spectacles through which we see everything, Abstraction/Modernism has become a category, in an almost Kantian sense, through which we see the art of ‘other’ cultures—even when it is (in its way if not ours) mimetic. Some Aboriginal people suspect Modernism as bottomed on perceptions of Indigenous people as primitive. They, understandably, don’t want to be called ‘primitive’.¹⁹ And they suspect Modernism’s ‘primitivist’ roots, not without some reason, perhaps.

The ‘ideal’ way for us to see Aboriginal art would be to see it as its makers do. Djon Mundine and Nicholas Rothwell have both suggested that we set to and study Aboriginal languages and cultures.²⁰ One might have thought that anthropology could help us with this, but the Aboriginal side see this ‘science’ as not one, but only as a device to define them as ‘the Other’. In a seminar at the University of Melbourne ‘Aboriginal Art: beyond Criticism’²¹ ‘anthropology’ got short shrift. The problem is—or has been made to be—that, not sharing a form of life with our Aboriginal fellow citizens we can not read their art: even when it is made, now, as trade goods, and for us.

This seminar on Aboriginal art ‘Beyond Criticism’ which I attended had—for me at least—a Kantian feel: Aboriginal art is ‘*beyond criticism*’ for Kantian reasons: we have no categories on which to base critical statements. Art criticism and the Critical Philosophy dissolve one into the other here. The easiest—at worst *only*—category/Category which *we* (white persons from the wooden ships) have is the Modernist one. And the only *experience* which we have to pack into these categories is ‘white’ experience. The ‘hegemonic order of Modernism’ may be part of white hegemony, but it provides the white side with a way of reading the art

of the black side. *And*, unlike ‘Anthropology’ (almost a rude word), Modernism does allow for the ‘exotic’, to be seen as not-so-‘exotic’, the ‘primitive as not-so-primitive’²². *And*, as well, allows contemporary Aboriginal art to develop, as develop it does. Let me spell out a little the Kantian point.

In a room full of Aboriginal art which I systemically misunderstand because I have no real knowledge of Aboriginal culture, and am now too old to learn even one of the necessary languages, I recall Kant’s, ‘*Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind*’.²³ (1) My thoughts in the exhibition are empty in that the inwardness of the paintings is not available to me. The Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty says, ‘they can’t catch my dreaming’,²⁴ so perhaps I can’t catch a painter’s. On the certificate of authenticity which I would get if I bought one of the works on view I would get a thumbnail account of the dreaming illustrated. Not sharing the form-of-life of the painter, the little snippet of revealed sacred knowledge would not help me much.

Now again (2) ‘...*intuitions without concepts are blind*’: I have intuitions of the patterns of the painting before me, but if I am without—any or sufficient—Aboriginal concepts, then to remain unblind I must fall back on the Modernist ‘concepts’. Stalemate?

Are ‘our’ understandings of Aboriginal art rendered impossible because Aboriginal *concepts* are incommensurable with any that we can have? If so, certainly stalemate.

Stalemate? Not quite. Aboriginal intellectuals writing in the Imperial Language which we both share can throw the light that they say anthropologists can not on the art of the First People. The points may not cover the whole field, but there is no doubt more to come. In her essay, ‘The presentation and interpretation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art: the Yiribana Gallery in focus’, Margot Neale writes about ‘*shimmer*’ as it is caught/generated by *raak*, that is, fine cross-hatching usually used in bark painting, but extendable to other kinds of work:

...the location of Ada Bird’s painting, *Aweelye for the Mountain Devil Lizard* in the ‘Shimmer’ section, [of the Yiribana Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales] makes it apparent that this artist is aiming to invest the work with

spiritual power through optical effects for ceremonial purposes. Her access to a wide range of high-keyed acrylic paints has led to an increase in her ability to 'create shimmer' and thereby enhance the cultural intent rather than a diminution. The greater the shimmer, the greater the spiritual power.²⁵

This set of remarks makes of 'Shimmer' a Trans-Cultural topic, visible and discussable from both sides. That the work of art has a spiritual power is an idea which we whitefellas can connect with if we know a little about Greek and Russian Orthodox icons. The idea is familiar. But on shimmer itself? Were I a millionaire I would take Ms Neal and a group of Aboriginal artists to Siena to see Duccio's *Maestà*, where in the 'Scenes from the Life of Christ' there is 'shimmer'. You may recall the quasi-Byzantine style of *Maestà*, the gold background, and the gold ridge-lines which mark the folds of garments. These lines prevent the emergence of Renaissance, realistic, three dimensional illusion, by tying the figures into the gold leaf ground on which they stand. But, positively, they record the sacredness—the power—of the figures. Crucial is the fact that the robes of Christ himself have more gold lines—more shimmer—than those of any other figure. A Trans-Cultural moment could be had, shimmer in Siena.

5. 'Ontology'

In her important paper, 'Appreciating "traditional" Aboriginal Painting aesthetically'²⁶, Elizabeth Burns Coleman gives another 'shimmer' case: '...Mawalan Marika's 1960 painting of his trip to Sydney used *raak* (cross hatching) the optical shimmer of which is a sign of spiritual power in Yolngu art to create an impression of the shimmering city lights at night'.²⁷ If city lights can be done in *raak*, then an Aboriginal transcription of *Maestà* is possible? What it would look like one doesn't know: only the shimmer element comes, *ex hypothesi*, across by itself.

Dr Coleman's paper has in it a very important general notion, too, one of 'ontology', which I would embrace because I find, as a collector in a small way, that I have been using it already all along. Collectors 'know the form' as football and horse racing fans do. The notational-structures of Aboriginal painting become very familiar: the circles

(camp, campfire, waterhole) the dots, the ‘sandhills’, the shimmers: one learns to recognise, and recognise the play of, these. How these elements are actually on occasion handled in a design, as a composition, determines one’s aesthetic response to the *surface of a canvas/story*. One reads the surface as instancing a good or bad example of a of handling types/tropes in painting: this when (as Aristotle did in his *Poetics* and *Politics*), one has become empirically familiar with the types and tropes in question. One has become a *connoisseur*, because the field is what one knows. Coleman writes:

What I would like to do ... is suggest a ... way of approaching classical Aboriginal paintings aesthetically. This approach focuses on the history of production, or the *ontology* of the painting, and breaks down the apparent conflict between the modernist and “traditional” understandings of Aboriginal art. It does this by establishing categories or types that allow us to judge creativity and skill in a painting, while acknowledging that designs are inherited. As such, it focuses on the skills of the artist rather than the meaning of the representation.²⁸

Later she writes, ‘...the ontological analysis [presents] an approach non-Aboriginal people may use in aesthetic appreciation. *This involves our comparing paintings or their elements as instances of types*’: her—reductive—example is the range of versions of the letter ‘A’ in Lettraset. She goes on, with another comparison, ‘In appreciating the Book of Kells without understanding the meaning of the symbols and words, we appreciate the *formal* aspects of the composition...’²⁹

Collecting, one collects as a *formalist*/‘*ontologist*’. Does this entail one’s collecting—then—as a Modernist? Well: if all Modernism is Formalism, this does not of itself entail that all Formalism is Modernism. Cases need to be negotiated pragmatically. We find, if we take the ontologist line, that we are appreciating Aboriginal art not quite as Modernists: there is a spectrum shift, from Picasso to Rover Thomas.³⁰

My only misgiving about Dr Coleman’s neat solution—one of which one has already in real life availed oneself—is that ‘ontological’ claims perhaps a little too much. Ontology is ‘the science of being’, and the being of aboriginal works of art is set in a context such as I have set

out, and she has set out, each in our different ways. Suddenly the aesthetics of Aboriginal art looks *e.g.* un-Thomist, ‘a being *is-what-it-is*’, and closer to the relativity-of-the-item-to-the-totality, as one finds it in the now unfashionable philosopher F.H. Bradley. Coleman’s including in ‘ontology’, ‘the history of production’ suggests that actually to do typical/formalist aesthetic evaluation of a ‘surface’, one needs to know a little more about it than *it* ‘shows’. Well: one has all along lived with that. With one’s eye ‘in’, and with the story on the certificate of authenticity only partially helpful, one makes one’s judgement.

One might even read Aboriginal works as free beauties, but one leaves this for another occasion.³¹

As I have suggested, Aboriginal Painting is so splendid—and so glows with its own inner light—that aesthetic evaluation should not be either problematic or problematized. But it is: and the reasons go deeper than aesthetics. The art may transcend: but aesthetics must at least defend this transcending, without either ignoring or allowing too much to the interracial politics.

In the exhibition *2004: Australian Culture Now* (Opened, National Gallery of Victoria, June 7, 2004)³², the Aboriginal artists lead the field; the rest of the field, lagged rather.

6. *Cosmology and Catastrophe*

There are, I suggested, two kinds of Aboriginal story: the sacred one, where the painting is both map and prayer book, and we can just—with help—read the map, and the prayer book baffles us. There is also the political story where massacres are the topic. In the exhibition *Blood on the Spinifex*, (Melbourne 2002), Freddy Timms Ngarrmalini showed six panels 180x150cm (making 180x900cm in total) each in grey black and white so ‘abstract’ and calm as to seem suitable in a Zen monastery. Yet the panels tell about massacre.³³ This one knows only because the label says so, and because a more or less amateur group of Aboriginal persons put on a Brechtian theatre piece, *Fire, Fire Burning Bright* (Melbourne Festival, 2000), all about massacres in the Kimberley, which set the exhibition, at first sight calm-‘cosmological’, well within the political-catastrophic. Poisoned Aboriginal persons’ bodies had been put in a bonfire. Reviewing the exhibition and the

play, I wrote a piece centring on the image on the catalogue cover 'The Escape', a painting by Phyllis Thomas, of a man on a horse, himself a kind of shield with a gun coming out of his mouth, running down an Aboriginal man armed only with a spear and boomerang.³⁴ My review was entitled 'The False Knight and the Original Sovereigns of the Soil'.³⁵ James Martin, who came to be Chief Justice of New South Wales, and after whom Martin Place in Sydney is named, as an ambitious schoolboy published his youthful essays³⁶ which contain the—startling—phrase *à propos* the Australians, 'original sovereigns of the soil'. Had Martin kept these five words about the Aborigines in mind as he grew up, *terra nullius* might just have been nullified; and in the Nineteenth Century. Hopeless retrospective hope! In another possible world we might never have had the False Knight.

The so-called Urban Aboriginal painters, Gordon Bennett³⁷, Harry J Wedge³⁸, Lin Onus³⁹, Clinton Nain (etc) are variously but overtly political, and so they should be. And we, all, speak more or less the same street language, if from different sides of the same street.

7. *Ontological and Relational*

Inge Clendinnen's marvellous book concludes, if not with a dance, with a cool message:

The men of the First Fleet deserve honour ... for their openness, their courage, and their stubborn curiosity. In the end, it was the depth of cultural division which defeated them, not any lack of energy, intelligence or good will.

Every indigenous people has walked their trail of tears, but few others enjoyed that springtime of trust... History is not about the imposition of belated moral judgments. It is not a balm for hurt minds, either. It is a secular discipline, and in its idiosyncratic way a scientific one, based on the honest analysis of the vast, uneven, consultable record of human experience. To understand history we have to get inside episodes, which means setting ourselves to understand our subjects' changing motivations and moods in their changing contexts, and to tracing the devious routes by which knowl-

edge was acquired, understood, and acted upon. Only then can we hope to understand ourselves and our species better, and so manage our affairs more intelligently. If we are to arrive at a durable tolerance (and it is urgent that we should), we have only history to guide us.⁴⁰

‘But’, she might have added ‘history like any good story has a moral’. The story of political animals is a story from which the moral can never be absent: from *polis*, ‘politeness’, ‘policy’, ‘police’, and so on. Bad, bad policies have left the police less than polite to Aboriginal persons.

The aesthetics of Aboriginal art seen from the Settlers’ side is only a footnote, but an important one, to our all being different and together in the same ‘Commonwealth’. Perhaps through the appreciation of current (and past) Aboriginal art we may come to some mutual understanding. At any rate the production of ‘Black’ art for a ‘White’ market is for the contemporary Aboriginal people both a marker of existence—‘Here I am: I made this: read it!’—and a source of revenue. Both are much needed. And art has been used in Land Claims to prove prior occupation.⁴¹

The project of Empire was not to produce Albert Namatjirra, Rover Thomas, Paddy Bedford and numerous other painters, but it did. Ironically the Aboriginal people who were never—notionally—here in the first place, still ‘paint in Aboriginal’ not ‘English’; despite ‘us’. They did not take lessons from Watling, even if they did watch him paint. *And* Aboriginal Art has become Australia’s first International Art Movement, more cared about overseas than is our own ‘Colonial’ stuff. Poor Watling is quite out-classed.

As a pessimist I close on a ‘*down*’ note. Some years ago with a group of students in the National Gallery of Victoria I saw two Aboriginal men, one young, one old, showing a mixed group of obvious out-of-towners—Aboriginal and White—a wall of Aboriginal paintings. I edged my group to within earshot of the Aboriginal explainers. A story was told by the younger man. The older interrupted, crossly. The younger said, to all at large, ‘He says I am revealing a *secret* story but...’ pointing to my group, ‘tell *you* a secret and it will stay a secret!’ My

group did not have a form of life into which to fit a cosmological story: we were small 'I' liberal enough to be embarrassed by a catastrophe-story.

Clendinnen is more optimistic: she writes of the two 'races':

There remains a final mystery. Despite our long alienation, despite our merely adjacent histories, and through processes I do not yet understand, we are now more like each other than we are like any other people. We even share something of the same style of humour, which is a subtle but far-reaching affinity. Here, in this place, I think we are all Australians now.⁴²

At any rate, in our Formalist/Modernist/Ontological way we appreciate Aboriginal paintings, and possibly Aboriginal persons can appreciate ours. In the end, the paintings speak for themselves. We can appreciate what we can not yet lucidly talk about. Aesthetics is *meta*: art is prime.

NOTES

- 1 *The City of God* by St Augustine of Hippo, trans. John O'Meara, Penguin Books, London & Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 139. End sentence of IV, Ch. 6.
- 2 Thomas Watling, cited in Inge Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*, p. 250.
- 3 *Dancing With Strangers*, by Inge Clendinnen, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2003. This book won the New South Wales Premier's Award for non-fiction in 2004. My citations from it over-simplify grossly a beautifully wrought pattern—one in which the 'Aboriginals' have a voice, too. For another 'first contact' book see *In the Wake of First Contact: the Eliza Fraser Stories*, by Kay Schaffer, Cambridge U. P. 1995. This, too, is 'many voiced'.
- 4 Clendinnen, op. cit. *plates*, p. 3.
- 5 *Blacklines*, p. 182. See note 11 below.
- 6 Mabo: see *Sharing the Country: the case for an agreement between black and white Australians: with a new chapter on the implications of the Mabo judgement*, by Frank Brennan, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria, 1994. 'Mabo Day' is 3rd of June.
- 7 'Mysterious dancing together', Clendinnen, pp. 8-9.

- 8 'A visionary', Clendinnen, pp. 25-26, 34-35.
- 9 'Conflict over land', Clendinnen, p. 202.
- 10 *Blacklines*, see note 11 below. 'Interior decoration' see pp. 82-83 of *Blacklines*.
- 11 'The Sublimes and Natural Theology...' for 'white' philosophy and metaphysics (mis)read into Aboriginal art by Patrick Hutchings, see *Sophia*, Vol. 38, No. 2, September October 1999, notes 20ff. The First People cannot have the 'almost-but-not-quite-getting-it' of the whitefella sublime: for the Dreaming is an All-Present. Present-Now—one is told—which is not to be had in Rationalist terms.
- 12 'Usurpation', Clendinnen, p. 86.
- 13 *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michele Grossman, Melbourne University Press, 2003. (Introduced by Ian Anderson, Michele Grossman, Marcia Langton and Aileen Moreton-Robinson; Michele Grossman Coordinating Editor.)
- 14 'Enlightenment' & unintelligibility, *Blacklines*, p. 23. Italic added.
- 15 'Critical humanist's agenda', *Blacklines*, p. 142.
- 16 'Incommensurabilities'/'the hegemony of whiteness', *Blacklines*, p. 77. Italic added.
- 17 Von Sturmer, *Blacklines*, p. 122. The problem/'problem' of what Aboriginal Art is 'authentic' is raised in: 'Rosella Namock's post Aboriginal Art', by Rex Butler, *Australian Art Collector*, Issue 21, Sept 2002, pp. 67-69; 'Disorientation: the affect of Lockhart River's Indigenous Art', by Sally Butler in *Eyeline*, No. 54, Winter 2004, pp. 24-25. The problems set by Aboriginal groups which do not wish to give up their *law* came to light in August 2004. The Administrator of the Northern Territory (i. e. H. M. the Queen's representative in the N. T.) joins Aborigines in protesting at new laws concerning Aboriginal marriage customs, which allow husbands to have sex with wives considered by the NT Government to be under age. See 'Row over vice-Regal Foray into black law' by Ashleigh Wilson in *The Weekend Australian*, 'The Nation' p. 11. The interracial political issues are hot ones indeed. Ted Egan, the Administrator, is reported as having said, 'the [new] law should be discussed before it is enforced. "The notion is that it is a lot of dirty old men preying on little children. That's not how it usually works," I think there is a lot of debate that has to go on before the law is in place'. He had earlier said the indigenous marriage system is as old as the people'. While art connoisseurs are debating whether Aboriginal art which departs from traditional norms is 'authentic', old customs which Aborigines might wish to keep do not fit in with the mores of the twenty first century Settler Australians. Talk of 'incommensurability' here simply would dodge very serious issues.
- 18 *Kant on Absolute Value*, London, Allen and Unwin; Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1973.
- 19 *Blacklines*, passim.
- 20 'Learn Aboriginal languages', Djon Mundine suggests this, see Coleman (below note 20), note 27, and Nicholas Rothwell in 'Crossing the Divide' in *The Weekend Australian*, April 3-4, 2004, pp. R18-19.

- 21 'RAKA views: Indigenous art: beyond criticism', seminar to accompany the RAKA exhibition. Panellists: Lindy Allen, Brook Andrew, Nazareth Alfred, Paul Carter. There is unfortunately no published transcript of the panel's exchanges. Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne, December 2003. For the RAKA Award exhibition, see *Art Events Ideas* the Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne, Issue #3, 2003 and the catalogue *RAKA Award, Places that name us*, in *Contemporary Indigenous Visual Arts #3*, same publisher.
- 22 'Primitive' Art: How Picasso read 'the primitive' one can not go into here: but 'primitive' need not have been even in his early days, pejorative. Like Protestants, the Modernists aimed to return to the sources, 'the primitive Church'. The Nazarenes and the Pre-Raphaelites had already tried this, without becoming proto-Modernist. Picasso and his confreres did. To take one example, Picasso's fascination with the painted apsidal frescos of Catalonia—now in the Museu Nacional d'Art Catalunya, Barcelona—was with things less 'primitive' than *simplified*. These apsidal heads of Christ seem to reduce the mosaics of Ravenna, to a smaller scale, without tesserae, in a stripped down version. Catalan frescos can be seen not as primitive, but as in some way reductionist: radical simplifications of what Yeats called the 'artifice of eternity'. They played their part in Picasso's move—by no means a solo move—to allow the devices of representation to trump the so-long-sought-for-illusions of Academic Art. Ravenna itself is not hoping-to-be-mimetic—but quite another thing again. A matter of power to awe. The Catalan frescos have this—along with their 'simplifications'. The notion of 'the primitive' in relation to modern art is essentially contestable, and in the interests of harmony in Australia/Settler aesthetics, attempts should be made to lay it to rest. As did Man Ray whose photographs of 'Kiki with African Masks', 1926, did by conjoining cool black elegance with cool white elegance.
- 23 *Critique of Pure Reason*, by Immanuel Kant, B75 A51, at p. 93 of the Norman Kemp Smith trans. Macmillan, London, 1929.
- 24 'They can't catch my dreaming', Lionel Fogarty. See *Blacklines* 4, by Jackie Huggins pp. 60ff. 'Can whites now catch our dreaming? As Lionel Fogarty says when he writes poetry intentionally in an "alien" and confusing Aboriginal way to whites, "they can't catch my dreaming". However his poetry is accessible and worldly to Aboriginal readers...' *Blacklines*, p. 62. How far painters are readable or unreadable, as a matter of fact or as a matter of intention, is an open matter. Even when one meets an Artist, and asks about a work which one has just bought, there is often a non-conversation, due to differences of language, and/or to the Artist's desire to keep mum. You do not buy the Artist's speakable thoughts just by buying his/her painting, whether you buy out of guilt or for-pure-aesthetic reasons.
- 25 'Shimmer', *Blacklines*, p. 105.
- 26 Elizabeth Burns Coleman, 'Appreciating "traditional" Aboriginal Painting Aesthetically', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2004, pp. 235-247. This important paper merits larger treatment than I give it here.

- 27 *Shimmer*. Coleman, p. 236 and 242. See, by serendipity, John Le Carré's *Single & Single*: writing of his (anti-) hero working successfully as a children's entertainer, 'He is the Prince of Shimmer, the unlikely rainmaker in their midst'. (S&S, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1999, p. 34.) For more Aboriginal shimmer, see *Bilwoyinj Site*, by Samuel Namunjdja, plate p. 51 of the catalogue *Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award: Celebrating 20 years*, Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 2003.
- 28 Coleman, 'Ontology', see the turn of the argument p. 244. A counter of Coleman's 'Ontology' might be found in Ben-Ami Scharfstein's 'Outline on an answer ... to the Question "In our Age of Artistic chaos, Can Art be Judged as Fairly as Possible?"' See #94, pp. 43-44 of *Aesthetics & Chaos*, ed Grazia Marchianò, Torino, Trauben Edizioni, 2002. Other rubrics than 94 may allow 'Ontology' e. g. #77-80.
- 29 One might argue that '...to appreciate [the *Book of Kells*] aesthetically as a physical object', Coleman, p. 244, would be to read it in a formalist way. See Peter Campbell on a show of Muslim art: *London Review of Books*, 'At Somerset House', 6 May, 2004, p. 19. 'Although we must take care when making judgments about the look of texts we can't read, there are pages here from two Northern African Korans of the eighth and 11th centuries in the geometric Kufic script which combine tremendous calligraphic energy with such perfect manual control that one is almost grateful for the ignorance that hides the meaning of the words and increases the impact of the visual residue.' It may—if an Aboriginal painted story remains forever opaque to us, to be sufficient read if as a 'visual residue'. This would amount to reading it formalistically.
- 30 Reading/(mis)Reading Aboriginal art as Modernist may mean no more than reading it by analogy: in 'our' case from the more to the less familiar. It goes both ways. Some years ago the National Gallery Victoria bought a luminous Long Tom Tjapanangka in red which they hung next to their—only—Rothko, also red. Long Tom was shown the pair: 'This white bloke is not a bad painter!'
- 31 Exhibitions of Paddy Bedford: (i) in Sydney 2003 (see *Walking the Line: Paddy Bedford*, booklet, pub. Jirrawun Arts, Kunurra Western Australia: intro. Dr Georges Petitjean); and (ii) at the William Mora Galleries in 2004, have been of gouaches which 'abstract from' traditional story-maps sufficiently to be *prima facie* cases of Kant's 'free beauty'. If one bought a gouache, one did *not* get a story with it, so to that extent free beauty readings were legitimated.
- 32 '2004: [*Australian Culture Now*]', catalogue ed. Charles Green: with essays by various hands, no imprint page, serial number 9 708724 102464. The Aboriginal Artists in the exhibition were Billy Benn Perrule, Paddy Bedford, Lena Yarinkura, and from Bidyadanga group, Weaver Jack, Donald Moko, Bertha Linty and Sally Liki Nanii. The essay on Indigenous art is by Judith Ryan.
- 33 *Blood on the Spinifex*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 14 December 2003–16 March 2003. The

Guest Curator was Tony Oliver, Arts Adviser Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation. The painters on show were: Goody Barrett, Paddy Bedford, Rameeka Nocketa, Lena Nyabi, Peggy Patrick, Rusty Peters, Desma Sampi, Phyllis Thomas, Freddie Timms and Timmy Timms. Notable is Professor Marcia Langton's essay 'Hungry Ghosts: landscape and memory'; op. cit. See also the theatre programme of *Fire, Fire Burning Bright* by the Neminuwarlin Performance Group for illustrations and biographical notes on the performers. See also 'Killing Fields of the Kimberly: to tell her people's story, a joonba, about a campfire built to burn human flesh', by Jo Roberts, in *The Age* 'The Culture 3' Melbourne Festival review, Thursday October 17, 2002. See also, 'Blood-red killing fields translated from word to canvas', by Debra Jopson *The Age*, '14 News, Saturday', December 14, 2002, which shows Freddie Timms in front of his wall-long painting 'Blackfella Creek' in the Ian Potter Museum. See also 'Diamonds from the Dreamtime', by Nicolas Rothwell in *Weekend Australian* 'Cover Story', April 19-20, 2003, R4 to R6. Some of the actors in *Fire, Fire*—all amateurs from the Kimberley itself—were afraid that they might be shot as the curtain fell, for telling the massacre story, kept so long a secret, and encrypted in Freddie Timms' calm-looking painting. The most extensive accounts, reassessing the Settlers' edited accounts of the treatment of the Australians, are by Henry Reynolds *c. f. Aboriginal Sovereignty, Three Nations One Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1996; *The Law of the Land*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, 1998; *The Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, 1998; *Why Weren't We Told?*, Viking/Penguin Books Australia, 2000. Also see *Reconciliation: a journey*, by Michael Gordon, University of New South Wales Press, 2001; *Our Land is Our Life*, ed. Galarraway Yunupingu, University of Queensland Press, 1997; *Blood on the Wattle, massacres and maltreatments of the Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, by Bruce Elder, New Holland Publishers, Australia 1988: 3rd ed. 2003; *The Great Land Grab*, by Michael Bacherlard, Melbourne, Hyland House, 1977; *The Colonial Earth* by Tim Bonyhady, The Miegunyah Press, at the Melbourne University Press, 2000; *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, ed. Nicholas Thomas & Diane Losche, Cambridge U. P. , 1999; *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, Djambatij Mola & Richard Trudgen, Darwin, Aboriginal Resource & Development Services Inc., 2000; *Frontier Conflict, the Australian Experience*, ed Brian Attwood & S. G. Foster, National Museum of Australia, 2003; *History & Native Title*, ed. Christine Choo & Shawn Hollback, University of Western Australia Press, 2000. The painter Julie Dowling had an exhibition "Warridah Sovereignty", 3 July–25 July 2004 at Artplace, Perth, arguing for the return of her family 'estate'. A similar exhibition *Native Title Business* was at The Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, June-July 2004, see 'Art Unites a Land Divided: an exhibition by indigenous artists in exploring native title in all its complexity', Carolyn Webb, *The Age*, 'Arts A3, p. 7' June 23 2004; *Artlink*, Vol 20, No. 1, 'Reconciliation? Indigenous Art for the 21st Century', Note particularly Professor Marcia Langton's, 'Homeland: sacred visions and the settler state'. The

headline reads, 'The barely concealed suspicion of the most acerbic antics of the Aboriginal art market is that transactions are driven by a demand for primitive art product as surrogate contrition', p. 11; *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada*, ed. Michael Asch, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1997.

Attempts to discount Reynolds etc. have been made by Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Vol. I, Mcleay Press, 2000. One is not convinced.

The State of Victoria is as at August 27 2004 about to amend its Constitution to recognize that the Aborigines were 'the custodians of the land' when the Colony of Victoria was established in 1854. Mr Bracks, the Premier, said 'while the bill will not confer any legal rights it is an important steps towards reconciliation between Victorian indigenous and non-Indigenous communities'. 'Victorian Custodial recognition a first', *The Age*, Friday August 27, 2004, 'News 7'.

Perhaps the finest study of an Aboriginal Painting group, working through real examples, is Fred R. Myers' *Painting Culture: the Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2002. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the aesthetics of Aboriginal Art.

- 34 Phyllis Thomas' *The Escape* has at the top the 'False Knight' and the fleeing Aborigine, in elegant graphic style. The rest of the painting is in a not-at-once-readable Aboriginal style. A bilingual painting?
- 35 'The False Knight and the Original Sovereigns of the Soil', may be found as 'Backwards into the Fire', shuttled into this catchpenny title, despite *The Escape* being one of the illustrations, by a sub-editor of doubtful competence who renders 'Patrick Hutchings' as 'Patrick Humphries'. It is to be found in *The Australian Art Review*, Issue 01, March 2003–June 2003, p. 55.
- 36 James Martin (1820-1886) discovered that if he got his schoolboy essays to the printer in time, he would be the first person educated in Australia to publish a book. The result was [*The | Australian | Sketch | Book, | by | James Martin, | an Ex-Student of the Sydney College, | Sydney, Published by James Tegg, George Street, MDCCCXXXVIII*]. The title is taken from Washington Irving's 'Sketchbook': there are *no* illustrations. For 'the original sovereigns of the soil', the essay in question is 'Botany Bay', p. 53 [F3], last two lines. Martin became Chief Justice of New South Wales, November 1873; Knighted 1869. Martin Place in Sydney is named for him.
- 37 Gordon Bennett *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, by Ian McLean Roseville, NSW, 1996. [There are some 30 references to G. B. in University of Melbourne Library Index.]
- 38 Harry J. Wedge, *Wiradjuri Spirit Man*, Intro., Brenda L. Croft, with an essay by Judith Ryan, Roseville, NSW, Craftsman House with the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Co-operative, c. 1996.
- 39 Lin Onus, see *Urban Dingo: The Art & Life of Lin Onus 1948-1990*, Queensland Art Gallery, 2001.

40 Clendinnen, p. 287.

41 Art used to prove prior occupation of land; Professor Marcia Langdon, *Blacklines*, p. 110 & note 4. See also Note 32 of this present essay. See 2004 catalogue, and N. B. *Native Title Business, Contemporary Indigenous Art*, presented by the Gurang Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, a travelling exhibition curated by Joan G. Winter, cat. pub. by Keearia Press, (P. O. Box 139, Southport, Queensland, 4215), 2002. The crucial work of art in the business of proving title by painting country is Native Title canvas of 1997, c.f. *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, 2000, p. 49. See also Ryan in 2004 (note 31 above).

42 Clendinnen, *finis*.