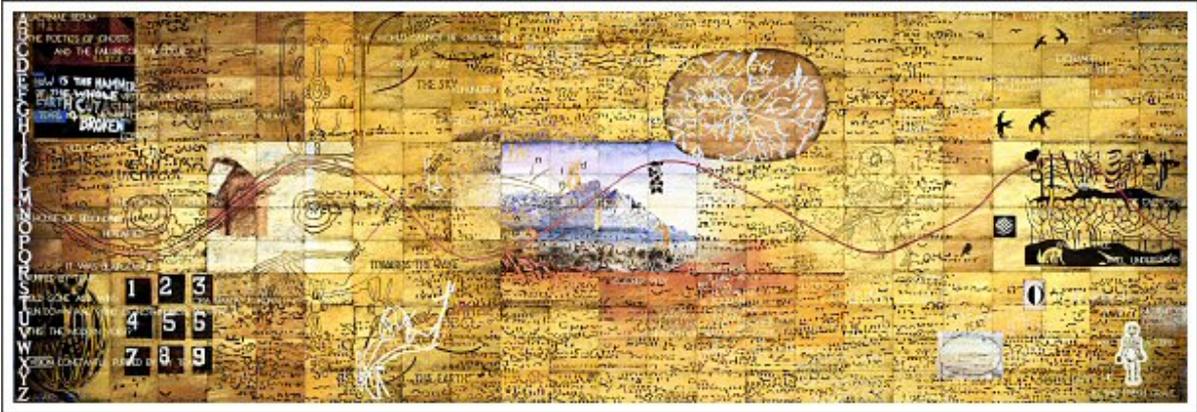


IMANTS TILLERS
– **THE LAST AUSTRALIAN OR THE FIRST POST-AUSTRALIAN**
ARTIST?



Lacrimae Rerum (2007)

A painting dedicated to his mother, the string of outback ghost towns scattered throughout *Lacrimae Rerum* (2007), the thicket of lost Aboriginal tribes to the left of *Terra Negata* (2005) – there is a subtle but powerful feeling of memorialisation about this show, fitting for a retrospective of sorts. One of the many things and people commemorated is the critic and curator Paul Taylor in the painting *Victory over Death (for Paul Taylor)* (1992). Taylor was a great advocate of an anti-national conception of Australian art in the 1980s. Undoubtedly his most famous statement on the subject was the manifesto ‘Popism – The Art of White Aborigines’, originally published in 1982 as an explanation of his influential exhibition *Popism*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria the same year – an exhibition to which, incidentally, Imants was a central contributor. Typical of Taylor’s dramatic (if to our ears today slightly over-blown) anti-nationalist rhetoric are the following few lines from the essay:

Our art and criticism have recently sought to reverse the shame of earlier generations concerning cultural alienation and instead to exploit that alienation as part of a multi-national strategy. A search for a regional Australian culture, ultimately a worthless pastime, reveals a centrifugal impulse wherein our art, like the mythopoeic Dreamtime of the Aborigines, has gestated upside down and is expressed in a carnivalesque array of copies, inversions and negatives.

Taylor is paradoxically both post-modern and avant-gardist at this point. He at once puts forward an art of radical unoriginality and insists on an equally radical break with the past. But – this would be the irony of post-modernism – Taylor could no sooner break with the past than he would inevitably make it over in his image. To put this another way, he could no sooner declare himself to be in the first generation of Australian post-modernists than he would see that Australian art has *always* been post-modernist, that no Australian artist ever did Australian art in the way he describes it. Or to put this still another way, Imants once did a painting called *Antipodean Manifesto* (1986), which can

only be understood as a kind of parody or critique of Bernard Smith's famous curated exhibition of the same name: instead of Smith's art of the real in the guise of the figurative image, we have here a painting of a painting; instead of an Impressionist golden summer, we have a sunset borrowed from Italian Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico.

But Imants' painting – and Taylor's manifesto – *did* ultimately become a new Antipodean Manifesto, renewing the possibility of a distinctive Australian art. In a supreme and brilliant paradox, the very uniqueness of Australian art was seen to reside in the fact that it was an art of the copy, an art that came from somewhere else. It was the new mechanical state of the contemporary image that Australia was seen to embody more than any other culture; it was this post-reproductive condition that singularly defined Australian art. Australian art came from no place, possessed no distinctive characteristics, but was rather in Taylor's words "ab-original [from or away from the original], soulless, antipodal reflection". Again, however, we could no sooner say this about a new generation of Australian post-modernists, that this was the new post-auratic fate of the image that they sought to make the basis of their art, than we would see that this had *always* been the founding possibility of Australian art.

Allow me briefly to try to show how. During the Second World War, the young painter Sidney Nolan did his military service in the wheatfields of the Wimmera in western Victoria. It appears he had quite a deal of spare time on his hands, much of which he spent atop the district's wheat silos, looking down at the land below. The question he kept asking himself as he sat up there was "what were the chances of doing the Australian landscape". His answer was to be found in the extraordinary Wimmera series, begun in 1942, painted fast with Ripolin house paint and uniformly featuring a high, aerial perspective (even drawing explicit attention to this elevated point of view in the form of children on top of railways crossings or angels with their wings held out in rapture). The works were the result of a kind of revelation he had, which he recorded contemporaneously in his diary:

It was alright when we were in sight of the Grampians [the mountains visible at the back of the Wimmera wheatfields] and then suddenly there was nothing of the earth except a thin line. And while I was thinking about all these things it came simply that, if you imagined the land going vertically into the sky, it would work.

The revelation Nolan had with regard to the Australian landscape concerned *distance*. What defined it and made it different from other places and what he needed to be able to find a way to represent in order to paint it was distance. This Nolan did by lifting the horizon line up towards the back of the painting, thus recreating the view he had from his wheat silo. Now we as spectators in effect look down on the landscape from up in the air when we stand in front of the painting. The distance that is usually invisible in European-style landscape is now rendered visible – those roads and railways tracks that commonly recede into the background now rise straight up the canvas refusing to disappear. We might properly grasp the magnitude of Nolan's artistic invention by comparing, say, *Kiata* (1943) to Russell Drysdale's *Man Feeding His Dogs* (1941). Drysdale undoubtedly has the same insight concerning the essential distance of the Australian landscape as

Nolan: the thinness and attenuation of his figures, taken from De Chirico and perhaps Giacometti, not only tells us of the hunger of and lack of food for both the man and his dogs but signifies a kind of distance, as though, no matter how close we get, we are looking at them from far away. But, if we can say this, Drysdale represents distance as merely the *content* of his painting and does not use it to initiate a *formal* rethinking of the entire painterly set-up, as does Nolan.

Nolan had this great insight into the nature of the Australian landscape – one shared by Margaret Preston, as seen in this painting of the Shoalhaven River in northern NSW from around the same time (and mine is, admittedly, a masculinist history of Australian painting) – but he was unable to develop it any further throughout his career. He again and again referred to an aerial perspective in his paintings. Ned Kelly is spied upon from it (we might suggest, judged from it); and various figures in the Kelly series fall from it (it is certainly encoded in Nolan's paintings as a higher realm). In *Pretty Polly Mine* (1948) Nolan uses the figure of a bird in flight to remind us from where we are looking at the picture and just how unstable our point of view is; how, unlike the stable, rooted view of European monocular perspective, we only look at the landscape or the landscape only exists for us insofar as we continue to move across it, insofar as we remain aloft.

Nolan was later even able to afford a plane like Preston and actually fly across the landscape; but he was still unable further to develop his initial insight and draw out all of the consequences of making distance the defining factor of Australian landscape, of seeing the Wimmera wheatfields from above. This would have to wait until about twenty years later when Fred Williams started doing works like *Australian Landscape* (1969-70). Already in its title, *Australian Landscape*, Williams is telling us something interesting. Although Williams was an *en plein air* painter and was in his own way very traditional – it would not be too far wrong to call him Australia's last or perhaps even true Impressionist – in calling his painting *Australian Landscape* he is indicating that it could be a painting of *anywhere*. Or that it is perhaps a painting of everywhere – and nowhere – at the same time. Maybe, indeed, that it is a painting of nothing, of the pure space between places. Here in Williams' picture, to paraphrase the French poet Mallarmé, whose words we see in so many of Imants' pictures, nothing takes place but the space; the space, we might say, before place. But, to go back a bit, let's take a look at Williams' first important landscape, *Landscape with Steep Road* (1957). It certainly looks like many of Nolan's Wimmera landscapes: the same high horizon; the same steep road rising up the back of the picture, refusing to recede as it reaches the top; the same dotted calligraphic trees scattered about the canvas. Did Williams see one of Nolan's pictures before making it? That, I think, remains an open question. Nolan certainly believed so. Williams undoubtedly saw the very similar Kelly series when it was exhibited in 1948, and it is possible he saw the Wimmera series while it was stored at Heide. It is hard to say otherwise where Williams got the idea from – there are no such steep roads in Cézanne, for instance.

Anyway, I think the main thing is that Williams starts off with the same pictorial problem as Nolan. What to do with this high point of view? What are some of the painterly possibilities it opens up (which for we art historians, who don't ask exactly the same

questions, means what are some of the social and, dare I say, even metaphysical consequences of it)? Unlike Nolan, Williams *was* eventually able to find a way of pushing this initial premise of an elevated horizon further, of forcing it all the way. He struggled to find the solution for a number of years. We can see him searching throughout the 1960s, as the horizon lines in his paintings fade and grow weaker, but nevertheless persist. But then, almost in despair at being able to push the Nolanesque formula any further, Williams stops directly trying to attack it. Patrick McCaughey in his book on Williams speaks of two gouaches, *You Yangs (Divided Landscape)* (1969), as the key transition works to *Australian Landscape*; but it is perhaps by casting his mind back to the Sherbrooke Forest series he had been doing since 1958 that Williams made his breakthrough. It is not in the open, distant, sparsely populated “outback” landscapes he had been doing, but in the close, hazy, eucalypt forests of suburban Melbourne that Williams had his revelation. He finally took those vertical lines of Nolan’s roads and railways right up to the top of the canvas (and he knew very well, of course, the stand of gum trees to the left of Tom Roberts’ *Bailed Up* (1895) at the National Gallery of Victoria that does almost the same thing).

Williams had finally found a way of completing the revolution in Australian landscape painting that Nolan had begun. In Williams’ mature paintings, the horizon line completely disappears as the landscape rises completely to the top of the canvas. Now, we might say, the difference between the painting and what it is of disappears: the surface of the canvas becomes equivalent to the surface of the landscape. We no longer have a painting *of* a landscape, but the painting *is* a landscape. We see this with those blobs of paint that sit so insistently on the surface of Williams’ paintings: they are not representations of anything; they are real, inhabit our own physical space. But, in an uncanny way, they are also, when you step back and look at the canvas as a whole, like individual vanishing points scattered around the canvas, signs of pure distance. If in Nolan’s paintings, we can see the landscape only by moving or flying across it, in Williams there is nowhere properly to see the landscape: it is at once in our space, part of the world, and infinitely far away, unattainable. Scale collapses, both within the painting and in our relation to the painting. (Within the painting, far can be near and near can be far: fern fronds seen close-up in a 1968 diptych look just like distant tree stumps seen from a long way away. It is an effect, incidentally, that we see in the work of Kathleen Petyarre, in whose work also the microcosmic is the macrocosmic: a single sandhill scored by the tracks of a thorny devil lizard seen close-up looks like a whole Dreaming site seen from the perspective of something like a helicopter.)

To say this more precisely, with Williams and the collapse of the representational distance between the painting and the landscape, we can no longer say which comes first: the painting or the landscape. At the same time as the painting becomes the landscape, so the landscape becomes its own painting. We see this with Williams’ well-known remark – much like the one Picasso passed on to Gertrude Stein when she first saw his portrait of her some seventy years before – to a viewer at one of his exhibition openings. When this viewer angrily complained to Williams that his paintings did not look like any landscape he knew of, Williams simply replied: “That is how a landscape should be, even if it isn’t”. Of course, we already have here – for all of Williams’ supposed conservatism –

the fundamental post-modern insight that Australia is already its own reproduction, that to paint Australia is to paint a kind of absence or nothingness, or nothing at least that exists before being painted. Australia in Williams' paintings is not so much either here or there as always in between places, here *and* there, to use a phrase that crops up so often in Imants' paintings.

What would Imants' equivalent to Williams' *Australian Landscape* be in this exhibition? I'd go beyond the obvious *Melancholy Landscape II* (2007), which remakes one of Williams' late-60s gouaches, and pick one of his series of *Stacks*: the demounted collection of canvas boards that make up his pictures, packed up and ready to be sent elsewhere. We have there the same blankness and self-erasure, the same piling up of paint, the same in-between status: a work that literally cannot be seen because it is at once all too physically present in our space and already on the way to somewhere else. But Imants is merely the latest in a long list of Australian artists who have followed Nolan's and Williams' extraordinary breakthroughs in the depiction of the Australian landscape. We might just provide here a partial list:

– John Olsen and his *Desert Void* (1975) series, which if you look closely is painted either from the macroscopic point of view of an eagle circling overhead above the animals gathered around the waterhole with its broken reflection in the water or from the microscopic point of view of a mosquito larva in the desert pond looking up at the sun through the water;

– Brett Whiteley's painting of Sydney Harbour from his waterfront apartment, *Balcony 2* (1975), with a very interesting equivalence made there between the flowing waters of the Harbour and the shifting sands of the desert – an equivalence made too in Olsen's mural for the Opera House, *Salute to Five Bells* (1972-3), which records the last moments of a man drowning in Sydney Harbour, in which the viewer, much as in Williams' desert landscapes and Olsen's own *VOIDs*, is plunged into the medium of the water itself;

– This is something that is to be seen also in the landscapes of the Queenslander William Robinson, who captures something of the aerial effect of Nolan and Williams in his *Pee-Wee Landscape* (1985), in which we are both above the trees looking down and looking up from under the trees curving overhead around us as in a Baroque ceiling painting. And in Robinson's depiction in *Bill and Shirley, Fauna and Flora* (1985) of the lush northern NSW coast, with its rolling green hills and precipitous cliffs that suddenly open up to faraway perspectives of the sea, we have the same effect as in Olsen, occupying at the same time the macrocosmic view of a beneficent God blessing the landscape with a rainbow and the microscopic view of an insect looking out from within the fisheye lens of a raindrop, in which the whole world is reflected and reproduced in miniature.

It is a roll-call that includes any number of other artists, both European and Indigenous. We might think here of Ian Burn's *Blue Variables* (1966), with their vertical yellow lines and subtly staggered blue horizons; Tim Maguire's water tanks, which form a wavering vertical through which the landscape can be seen; and the series of paintings that Tim Johnson did at Papunya from the mid-80s, which explicitly make the connection

between Williams' landscapes and the Aboriginal dot painting being produced at the time. It is a distance that we see also in the overhead perspectives of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, in which we look down at the landscape from above the clouds; but a number of other Aboriginal artists can be seen to belong to this same "tradition" of Australian landscape painting: Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and his images of a bushfire viewed across several hills; Emily Kngwarreye and her yam paintings, with their tangled and folded-over pathways; and George Tjungurrayi and his tessellated checkerboards, which attempt to produce a visual equivalent of the passage between incommensurate spaces and language groups.

In all of this work we have the same insight into the distance and the difficulty of getting from one place to another that could be said to define Australian art from the beginning. For, undoubtedly inspired by the re-reading of the Australian landscape tradition opened up by Imants' work, art historians today are going back to the so-called origins of Australian art and finding the same "post-modern" insight into Australian identity. It is almost as though as soon as the colonial artists sailed into Sydney Harbour they became Australian, started seeing the distance and emptiness all around them as the defining condition of Australian identity. We might think here of the seemingly unbridgeable expanse between the ships and the shore in this early image by one of the First Fleet artists; the way Thomas Watling situates civilization on the other side of the Harbour in *A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove* (1794); and Augustus Earle's famous image of the early colonists clambering out of and looking back into the picturesque void of Wentworth Falls.

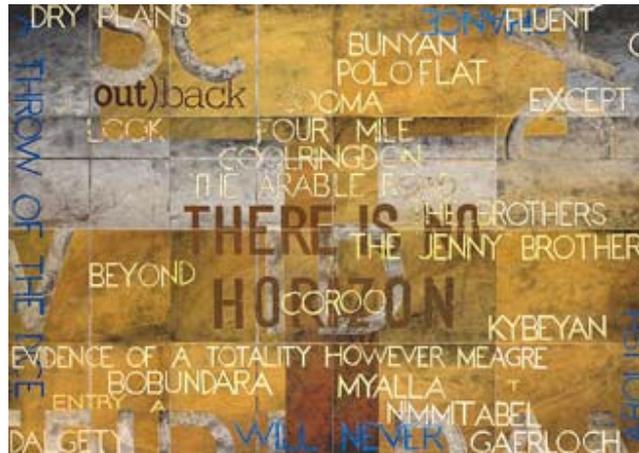
And just in case anyone thought that this landscape tradition was dead, let us recall who and what we are sending to the Venice Biennale this year: the video artist Shaun Gladwell and his *Maddest Maximus* (2007-) series, in which he seeks to remake aspects of the *Mad Max* series of films, which many have argued is one of the most important responses to the Australian landscape since Nolan and Williams. In the propulsive and compulsive driving through the Australian outback that characterises the series, especially the magnificent *Mad Max II* (1981), the films precisely literalise the insight of Nolan's paintings that the landscape is to be grasped only by moving through it, that it exists only in motion (and *Mad Max II* contains many sequences shot from an aerial perspective). In *Mad Max II* Max, who in the previous installment had lost his family to bikies and has nowhere to go to, exists only in the pure present of driving in his car; and the film, which is virtually one extended car chase and crash, seems likewise shot only from a camera mounted on top of a car. We might say of Max, to paraphrase Descartes, "I drive, therefore I am"; or, to paraphrase the Australian cultural studies theorist Meaghan Morris, we might suggest that Australia exists here not so much in anything enunciated as in the moment of its enunciation.

To get back to Gladwell, what he admires in the *Mad Max* series is undoubtedly its pyrotechnic car and bike stunts, for which the film is justly celebrated. Gladwell is, of course, a performance artist who is interested in similar kinds of feat: flipping skateboards, balancing upside down on a bike standing on one wheel, forms of dancing in which the dancer spins on their head or does handstands. We can see in this still from

Maddest Maximus, Approach to Mundi Mundi (2007), Gladwell's brother undertaking a similar stunt, riding down a dusty road in Broken Hill, where *Mad Max* was filmed, with his hands off the steering wheel of his bike, forming a kind of crucifix.

This is all very spectacular, but there is another, less evident aspect to Gladwell's work that cuts against and problematises this aspiration to the documentary recording of some real and potentially dangerous physical performance. If we look at a long sequence of Gladwell's works – it is evident in *Maddest Maximus*, but it can be seen even in his very first work, in which he performs skateboard tricks against the background of a stormy sea – there is always a strong internal division, which tends to split the work across the middle. In an unexpected way, Gladwell has rediscovered the artistic possibilities of the *horizon* in Australian art – and, more than this, has seen in it just that same resource Williams found in his own work. Take this photograph from the series, *Maximus as Narcissus – Broken Field of Reflection* (2007), in which a trail bike rider stares at his own reflection in a pool of water. If we look at the image carefully for a while, we gradually become aware that it is in fact upside down and that what we take to be the rider staring down at his image below him is in fact his reflection staring up at the trail bike rider. Exactly as in Williams, what is real here (the landscape) is revealed to be an image and what is image becomes real. Or, in the light of Gladwell, it is almost as though we must imagine a horizon at the top of Williams' canvas, around which the painting flips, revealing an exchange between the actual and the virtual, the landscape and the reflection of the landscape.





All of this is preliminary to understanding just one aspect of Imants' recent landscape painting, and that is the insistent use of the word and concept "Horizon" in the ongoing *Nature Speaks* series (1998-). It is a presence given extra meaning by the occasional statement "There is no Horizon" in some of the works. What is at stake in the notion of the "horizon" in Australian painting, Imants appears to be asking here. How has the concept or formal device operated throughout the history of Australian art? Even – an art-historical question – what is or has been its social or metaphysical meaning? If we were to imagine a new type of Australian landscape after post-modernism or after Aboriginal art – something we might want to call a certain un-Australian landscape painting – why would it be necessary to take up this question of the horizon? In order briefly to try to answer these questions, allow me to quote a passage from Ian McLean's *White Aborigines*, which is an account of how the presence of Indigenous Australians in this country is at once necessary for and necessarily repressed by the construction of an "Australian" identity. McLean writes (and it is about a time around when those first breakthroughs of Nolan and Williams were occurring):

We can explain why so many books about Australia that were published in the mid-twentieth century included phrases in their titles such as *Empty Land*, *a Dead Heart* and *a Timeless Land*. Because they enclose both Aborigines and the land in the same metaphors of entropy, the place is acknowledged as being both Aboriginal land and a *terra nullius*.

And we can see this logic played out in the specific terms of Australian landscape art, from Nolan to Gladwell, that I have just sketched. For all of its brilliance and formal innovation, it precisely treats the country as *empty*, as not just distant from other places but distant from itself. The genius of such artists as Nolan and Williams, and even let us say Imants, is that they found ways of painting nothing: the space between places. It was this absence, this lack of qualities, they felt, that defined Australia. It was in this nothingness, paradoxically, that an Australian identity – a something – was to be found. The physical space between two places in Nolan and Williams became the conceptual difference between the original and the copy in Imants. It was not in either its specific locations or in the original or the copy that Australia was to be found, but in the distance between them. That is why, when you look at an Imants appropriation of another

painting, you are not meant to be looking at either the original or the copy – just as when you look at a Williams you don't know whether you are looking at the painting or the landscape – but at the *relationship between* them. It is this relationship, the distance between the original and the copy, that is what is distinctively Australian about Imants' works, that means it is Australian painting or painting about Australia, no matter what their actual content.

But what is left out of such a conception of Australia as a non-place, as empty, as always in between one place and another? Whoever and whatever lives there. Of course, it is well known that Nolan's images of Ned Kelly in his black suit of armour are a displaced representation of an Aborigine – undoubtedly, the whole psychic charge of Ned as doomed outsider destined to die gains its power from its unspoken resemblance to what most of us think of Aborigines. However, along the same lines, I once also had the idea of looking at the way Williams used black in his canvases, again as some unconscious acknowledgement on his part that there were in fact people living in his endless, deserted vistas.

At some point in his career, not simply corresponding, I think, with the criticism his work received from Indigenous artists for appropriating Aboriginal dot painting or even with his collaboration with Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, Imants began to think about the meaning of his previous depiction of the Australian landscape. For all of his being championed by such critics as Paul Taylor for breaking with any national history, Imants had always remained the most "Australian" of his generation of post-modernists, the one who – merely through his act of appropriating so many images from the history of Australian art – most acutely raised the question of what was the relationship between his work and what we had previously come to understand as "Australian" art. One of the outcomes of this period of self-reflection was the short 2004 text introducing the *Nature Speaks* series, 'When Locality Prevails', whose argument is not only a reversal of that of his earlier essay 'Locality Fails'. Another was a 2002 interview with the title 'Not Yet Aboriginal', a phrase that holds in extraordinary tension the two dominant possibilities of landscape painting in our time. Is it to be "post-Aboriginal" in the sense it has always been for Australian art? Is it to come *after* an Aboriginal presence in the sense that this presence is to be written out or written over in the imagining of the country as empty? Or is it to speak of an un-Australian or even post-Australian art that comes after the acknowledgement of a prior Aboriginal presence, that breaks with the prevailing conception of the country as empty? Is it to point to a post-apology art? In fact, I would argue that all Australian landscape today, black and white, embodies both of these possibilities. And furthermore, along the lines of that strange retrospective reading I began here by speaking of, I would argue that the entire prior history of Australian art can be seen in terms of these two possibilities, the ineradicable tension between Australian and un-Australian ways of seeing things.

Thus begins the slow and patient task of looking again at Imants work. It is a task that awaits all of us here today; but it is this other way of thinking Australian landscape that would constitute a second revolution after the first one of Nolan and Williams, and one more profound than the one Taylor announced. Allow me to present here before handing

over to Imants just a few of my findings. They might constitute something of a preliminary to any proper assessment of Imants' work. These remarks are necessarily suggestive, intended as an encouragement for further research. Undoubtedly they will seem a little schematic, didactic, oppositional to that other way of thinking Australian landscape, although ultimately my point is that these two approaches are complementary, that the entire history of Australian landscape painting can be read in both Australian and un-Australian ways.

– We would want to consider here the role of writing and language in general in Imants' recent paintings: not only as a way of recovering actual places and peoples that would otherwise be lost, but as a formal device that impedes or slows down the visual. As Imants writes in one of his paintings here: “A text arises as the blindness of a picture”;

– Along the same lines, we would want to think of Imant's technique of underpainting and subsequent cutting out to reveal what lies underneath. This goes against, I would argue, the practice of *covering up* by the overlaying of paint that we see in Williams. It is a technique that works metaphorically to suggest a kind of archaeological excavation of the past to reveal what lies behind or beneath our usual conception of Australia;

– Here we would want to look at the series of commemorative gestures in the paintings: not just the listing of ghost towns and lost Aboriginal tribes, but also the numerous references to ashes, burials, skulls and skeletons. It is also in this light that we would want to think Imants' referencing of Colin McCahon, the great artist of the after-life, of the “spirit” that lives on after death;

– Against the general doing away with of particular places in the construction of a generic “Australian landscape”, in Imant's new work there is a renewed emphasis on locality: Imants in interviews insists he is painting a particular place in Australia (Eden-Monaro), and names, thumbprints and emu prints taken from Michael Nelson Tjakamarra are meant to speak of a singular, individual relationship to this place;

– Against this – or, rather, against this idea of a delimitable “Australia” – in Imants' new work there is a strong emphasis on the skies or heavens: we not only have the near ubiquitous use of Phillip Otto Runge's angels or cherubim, but also a whole “astrological” gamut of signs and portents that appear towards the tops of his paintings. A whole tradition of un-Australian art would emphasise the sky rather than the land: the sky as what connects people as opposed to the land as what separates them;

– More generally, we might consider Imants' continued evocation throughout the *Nature Speaks* and later series of a different relationship to landscape. We can see this in the various words that are scattered across the canvases – ‘EMPATHY’, ‘FEEL’, ‘EMPATHY’, ‘THE HOUSE OF BELONGING’ – but also in the more nuanced, layered and sensitive paint handling. Here again it would be necessary to read Imants' essay ‘Locality Prevails’, which suggests another relationship to Aboriginal art than the series of polemical appropriations of it from the mid-1980s. He speaks there of becoming newly “aware” of the landscape and of the landscape having a “local resonance” for him;

– In this regard, if we were to connect Imants’ new approach to landscape to Indigenous art, it might be not to the male dot painters, whose work he appropriated in the 1980s, but to the female body painters of the ‘90s. The books on Aboriginal art we might want to read in connection with Imants’ recent work are Elizabeth Grosz’s *Chaos, Territory, Art* and Jennifer Biddle’s *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas*, both of which emphasise touch and not sight, feeling and not the conceptual, in our relationship to the landscape.

To conclude, it is a whole other tradition that we would need to read Imants’ work in terms of. It would be not the *prior* history of landscape that comes before it, but the history of Indigenous art that comes *after* it and was inspired by it. The artist Richard Bell once made a companion piece to his *Bell’s Theorem* (2002), which contains the by now well-known words “Aboriginal Art is a White Thing”. It was called *Australian Art is an Aboriginal Thing* (2006), and he followed this up a few years later with another work entitled *Australian Art Does Not Exist* (2008). Together these works sketch out an entirely different economy than the once Ian McLean outlines, in which Aboriginality is at once required and repressed in the formation of Australian identity. Here with Bell the withdrawal of Aboriginality means that such an identity can no longer be constituted, and there can therefore be no “Australian” art. How to acknowledge the prior occupation of this country by Aborigines without making it part of some overall category of the “Australian”? This might be one way of thinking what is at stake in Imants’ recent work, the new artistic problem he has set himself.

Rex Butler

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