

# The Economist

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## ARTS, BOOKS AND SPORT

### Aboriginal art

## Mythscape

AUSTRALIA'S great central desert is by no means a cultural desert. Among its baked rocks and sandhills dotted with spinifex grass are small towns and settlements populated by Aborigines, several of whom are highly rated as painters by museum curators and collectors around the world. This is a new and welcome development. Aboriginal culture has been marginalised and suppressed since the earliest British settlers in the 18th century declared the continent *terra nullius* (an empty land) even though 300,000 Aborigines lived there.

Fortunately, Aboriginal culture has nonetheless not only survived but thrived. Its rich diversity is demonstrated by "Aratjara: Art of the First Australians", an exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery until October 10th. "Aratjara" means the messenger. On show is art produced during the past century from all over Australia.

Aboriginal art takes many forms: body decorations, incised boomerangs, paintings on bark, rock pigments delineated with a stick in the desert sand, wooden sculpture, and bone and shell jewellery. All forms aim to foster states of visionary and spiritual awareness (which is usually translated as "Dreamtime"). Traditionally it is an ephemeral, often ceremonial, art.

Apart from sympathetic missionaries and anthropologists, those few white people who were aware of its existence used habitually to denigrate Aboriginal art. They were blind to its rhythms, its allusions and its beauty. It was not until the 1970s that some Aboriginal artists were encouraged by well-meaning outsiders to use paint and canvas. The results were extraordinary—nothing less than a re-awakening of ancient art traditions in a contemporary context. Enthusiasm for the art spread like a bush fire and was fanned by Australian commercial galleries, one of which is satirised in "The Songlines", a novel by Bruce Chatwin.

The emergence within the past 20 years of a dozen Aboriginal painters whose works are as good as those of any other modern art movement is revealed by the Hayward exhibition and at an exhibition series at the two Rebecca Hossack Galleries in London. Many of the paintings on show are aerial views of the land, and may be viewed from any angle.

To the innocent eye, Pansy Napangati's "Bush Mango, Two Travelling Women and Snake Tjukurrpas" (1989) at the Hayward is an ambitious, abstract picture with fractal-like forms and myriads of dots. But, as its title implies, its orbs, coils and wavy lines are part of a conventional Aboriginal vocabulary, uniquely applied, to tell mythical stories and map out sacred journeys.

Such work views all living things (from men to bushes to spiders) as inseparable links in a cosmic chain.

The current enthusiasm for Aboriginal painting coincides with a "land rights" campaign by Aborigines determined to gain legal title to ancestral territory. This Aboriginal attachment to harsh, baked land is seen at the Hayward in "A Bushstucker Story" (1972) by Johnny Warrangula Tiupurnula. Many layers of dots, applied be-



Imagine English watercolour seascapes and cityscapes on the walls of an African hut. Hall Barn and its orchard garden at Fen Ditton outside Cambridge is just as daunting a setting for the Shona sculptures which are on show there until August 15th. An even greater challenge is set by the Contemporary Fine Art Gallery at Eton which specialises in this art form from Zimbabwe. With Windsor Castle down the road and Eton College around the corner, the gallery is as remote as it is possible to be from the African high veld where its sculptures are made.

Yet the serene strength of the sculptures prevails even in these alien settings. Those unfamiliar with this stonework can get a good idea of its context and form from "Contemporary Stone Sculpture in Zimbabwe" by Celia Winter-Irving (Craftsman House; 203 pages; £43 and \$60). The book's many fine illustrations include Bernard Matemera's "Man Changing into a Rhinoceros" (above). It has notes on nearly all the artists who have made Shona stonework the greatest sculpture to emerge from Africa since the bronzes produced in the old kingdom of Benin.

fore, during and after heavy rains, celebrate the desert's flowering. They seek through oscillations of light and refined gradations of colour and tone to transport the viewer into a mystical state of mind.

Much of the urban Aboriginal art at the Hayward is a raw and polemical assault on racial prejudice and injustice. Robert Campbell, junior, a painter who died earlier this month at the age of 49, was subtler than most. The anger in his figurative paintings is relieved by a biting wit. In their mocking humour, Aborigines can be as boisterous as any other Australians.

### Techno dance music

## The Berlin sound

BERLIN

EVERY Sunday Peter Holder, a British ballet dancer living in Berlin, gets up at 4am—not to go jogging but to go dancing at the Planet, one of those fashionable nightclubs in the city which come alive in the early hours of the morning and stay open past noon on Sunday. Housed in a disused power station in what was until recently no-man's land between east and west Berlin, the Planet is noted for its image-distorting strobe-lighting and its "hard-core techno" dance music. With no lyrics and a heavy mechanised rhythm, techno is a popular style of dance—or "rave"—music.

As well as looking and sounding remarkable, clubs like the Planet show how much night-life has changed. Before the wall came down, west Berlin offered little more than dingy clubs playing inane disco music or doom-laden rock. Since 1989, boosted by licensing laws much looser than London's and entertainment prices much lower than in Paris, Berlin's night-life has benefited from the city's new-found confidence as the capital of a united Germany and the designated seat of government.

Among the places that have been transformed into fashionable night-spots are disused subterranean bank-vaults (Tresor), air-raid shelters (Bunker), decrepit warehouses (Dr McCoy) and watch-towers once used by border guards from the People's Army (Museum für Verbotene Kunst). The fact that many of the buildings are destined for demolition adds to the thrill: better enjoy them today for tomorrow they will be gone.

Within the clubs and the bars, the British- and American-influenced guitar-based music of the past has been replaced by the rhythmic beat produced by home-grown pop singers with such names as Cosmic Baby, Dr Motte, 030, Voov and Effective Force. They have taken a rhythm that originally came from the ghettos of Detroit and Chicago and matched it with a heavier, but also sometimes more "ambient", beat to