

due to exhibition commitments in Australia and the ever-present problems of keeping within a budget, it would be a delusion to assume that London has seen the best of Australian art this year.

The most outstanding and most highly-publicised show, 'Angry Penguins' at the Hayward Gallery, dealt with such a brief but crucial moment in Australian art history, that it needed a couple of satellite exhibitions to flesh out the story of Australian art and provide a context to see and interpret the gloomy images of the war years. The Phillips Collection of old and modern masterpieces, showing alongside 'Angry Penguins', provides exactly the wrong context. It made it easy to belittle or ignore these small, rough works in favour of the more ambitious and attractive works by the European masters next door.

And so, Tim Hilton, writing in *The Guardian*, could condescendingly sneer that 'it is a pity that there was no painter in the Angry Penguins group with a sensibility big enough to overcome the contradictions of provincialism'. He condemned Nolan, Boyd, Tucker and co. for lacking sophistication and trying out a 'pretence of primitivism'; but in war-time Australia it was patently impossible for these artists to develop the kind of formal, aesthetic coherence that this critic requires.

'Angry Penguins' had as much to do with history as with art, but properly to frame its historical relevance, there should also have been more comprehensive exhibitions of Australian past and present art. The show which tried to fulfil this role was 'Stories of Australian Art' at the Commonwealth Institute. Although it was respectfully reviewed, this exhibition was a failure, not just in the limited range of works that it was able to show, but in its initial conception, which set out to demonstrate a high-handed thesis about the 'fictional' nature of Australian art and experience.

In his catalogue essay, curator Jonathan Watkins asserts that 'there is no *real* Australia which transcends the human, all-too-human perceptions of it. Australia was not a con-

Australian Art Shows

by JOHN McDONALD

An Overview of Australia's Bicentennial Art in London

There has been a good deal of Australian art to be seen in London in the past few months, but it remains problematic just how well Australia has been represented. The more I reflect upon the exhibitions I have seen and the more people I talk to about their responses to these shows, the more disappointing it all seems.

Every single exhibition may have been organised with the best intentions in the world, but the overall picture presents but a partial and misleading view. While there have been obvious difficulties getting key works,



Albert Tucker, *Pick Up*, 1941, oil, 60.8 x 45.4 cm.
Australian National Gallery.

continent awaiting discovery – it was, and still is, a place to be invented – it is a collision of countless dreams, fears and desires. Australian art, therefore, cannot tell the truth about Australia, as there is no Australia to be truthful about. Australian art must tell stories'.

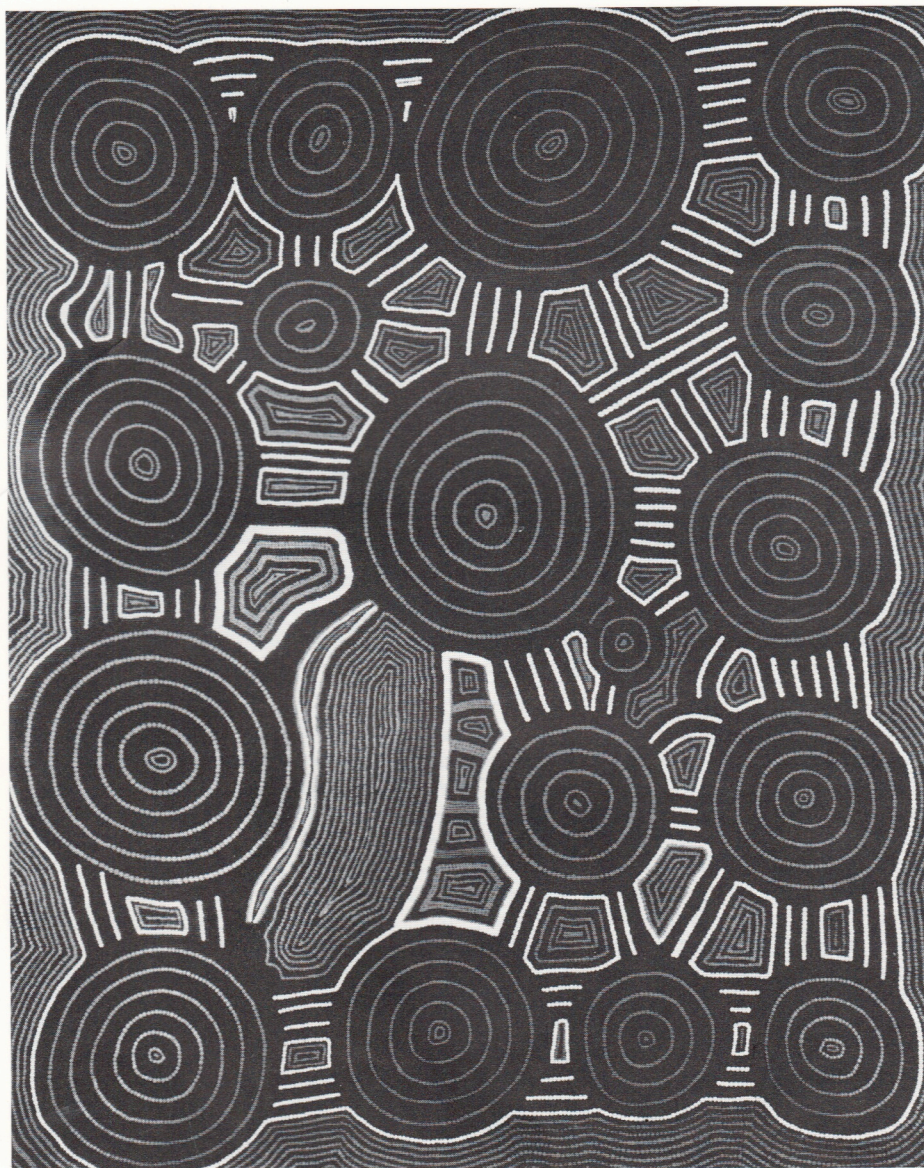
This statement, together with a quotation from Oscar Wilde's essay, 'The Decay of Lying', is presumably all the justification Watkins needed to divide Australian art up into four mythical sections: 'A Romantic Landscape', 'A Land of Golden Summers', 'An Empty Space' and 'A Postmodern World'. The trouble with these categories is that they tend to reduce a great variety of different styles and motivations to a few handy stereotypes which are then ticked-off for their indulgence in an illusory image of Australia. But since, according to Watkins's thesis, there can be nothing but false and illusory images in the entire history of local art, then the work of all previous periods seems like little more than a slow build-up to the deconstructive delights of postmodernism, which assumes that all positions are relative and all experience is textually-mediated.

The biggest drawback to this artificial genealogy was the dreadful quality of much of the so-called postmodern work. Artworks by an apparently arbitrary selection of 'post-modernists' such as Imants Tillers, John Nixon, Caroline Williams, Geoff Lowe and others, merely implied that Australian art had recently sacrificed any notion of indigenous cultural experience – as found in earlier works by artists as diverse as John Glover, Von Guerard, Arthur Streeton, Sidney Nolan or Arthur Boyd – for a self-conscious internationalism which laughed off Australian themes as hopelessly sentimental and intellectually backward.

Suffice to say that this is an extremely limited picture of contemporary Australian art, only a small part of which (albeit an outspoken and well-supported part) conforms to such ideas. It was a poor ending to these 'stories', the final instalment leaving a sour taste which poisoned all its predecessors.

The venue for this event also deserves comment, since the Commonwealth Institute is the most unsympathetic and ugly space that any exhibition could suffer. A vast, roughly circular monstrosity in a modernist-brutalist style which must have seemed chic in the 1950s, the Institute looks shabby and impersonal now. The floors of the gallery are linoleum, the wall-space is cramped. When a visitor leaves the show he or she is confronted by an international circus of tourist kitsch, as all the Commonwealth nations (Australia included) are allowed a few square metres to parade their wares to potential travellers and parties of unruly school children. Deanna Petherbridge, the critic for *The Financial Times*, told me that she thought that holding such a show in the Commonwealth Institute was 'an insult to Australian art'.

The major show at the ICA was a retrospective exhibition of works by Imants Tillers, dating from 1978 to 1988. It was complemented by a small exhibition of photo-works by Julie Brown-Rrap, Jeff Gibson, Bill Henson and Jacky Redgate, called 'Elsewhere'. Since this



Anatjari Tjampijimpa, *Tingari Men's Dreaming*, 1987, acrylic, 91.4 × 121.9 cm. Rebecca Hossack Gallery.

show was unceremoniously squeezed into a corridor at the ICA, it's hardly surprising that it received almost no response. Even the strong and evocative works of Bill Henson looked drab and dull in such a silly space, and the rest of the artists were virtually invisible.

Imants Tillers, unique and interesting artist that he is, has become Australia's most prominent international art export in the last few years. He was our official representative at the Venice Biennale in 1986 and now has had this prestigious survey show at the ICA to add to his *curriculum vitae*. Yet the irony of Tillers's institutional popularity is that he has found fame abroad by appropriating images from overseas artists to feed back to overseas audiences.

The cleverness of Tillers's exercises was largely lost on reviewers who have obviously been force-fed an excess of post-modernist antics in recent years. No-one manifested the slightest interest or sympathy, even when there was a grudging recognition of the conceptual sophistication of the work. It was, in a sense, all too familiar and predictable; too slickly packaged with a catalogue containing

another staged interview between Tillers and his wife Jennifer Slayter. There was an over-weening concern with international cultural icons, when visitors may have been looking for something more distinctively 'Australian'.

The happiest conjunction of the full programme of Bicentennial art events was between the Imants Tillers show and Jonathan Watkins's belief in the relative and fictional nature of Australian art. These two 'stories' coincided neatly, but the final result was a vague, self-conscious and self-denying image of a country keen to negate the authenticity of its own cultural achievements. It is, in short, a peculiar picture of Australian art to be setting up as part of a Bicentennial celebration. More than anything, it felt like some more subtle variant on the old 'cultural cringe', now generally thought to be no more than a stale cliché.

It would have been much better to see historical and contemporary art kept completely separate instead of constructing a phoney evolution for a few limp present-day products. Likewise, it would have been more illuminating to have seen a greater range of