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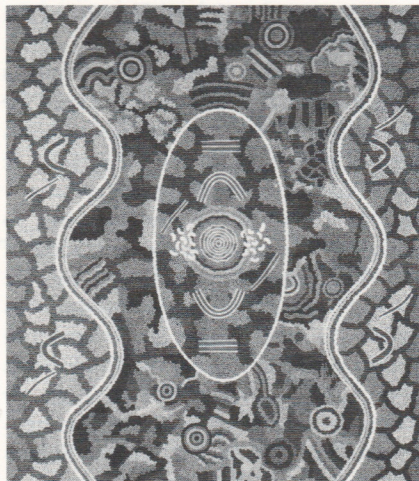
## Clifford Possum in London

DENNIS DUERDEN

The signs used in Aboriginal artists' paintings hover halfway between percepts and concepts. They refer to a narrative of the ancestors' creation of a landscape by their dreaming and they map that landscape by using a restricted set of conventions. At the same time these conventional signs reproduce some features of the landmarks in those landscapes as they are actually perceived. Since the ancestors went through various kinds of animal transformations the features of the landscape imitate the shapes of the animals as they travelled over particular routes and those shapes can be identified, e.g. a row of hills can be compared to the relief of the patterns on a crocodile's back, paths radiate like the threads in a spider's web, etc. This selection of particular forms abstracted from the landscape and compared to the conformations of animals' shapes is remarkably similar to the selection of natural patterns by the makers of African masks when they use the forms they have abstracted from animals' protective colouration. A special feature of the work of Aboriginal artists from the Central Desert is the use of a dense collection of discrete marks, especially of coloured spots. These can stand for a number of natural features which can be represented by a number of small repeated elements: seeds, feathers, pebbles, ant eggs, insects' holes, centipedes' legs, honeycomb cells, waves on water, etc. The field for their application is inexhaustible. The general effect of this multiplicity also reproduces the vastness of the Australian landscape, extending to the horizon in all directions over an expanse of desert or forest or scrub-covered plains with infinite numbers of rocks, trees and spiny plants. They swim about in front of our eyes and produce hypnogogic images with hallucinatory effects when we close them. We get the feeling that the landscape would only be reducible to a manageable structure from an aerial view. Perhaps this is what induced Fred Williams to take to the air to collect the images he provided us with in his landscapes.

The paintings of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri shown at Rebecca Hossack's Gallery in London together with those of other Pupunya artists not only create a memorable evocation of the Australian landscape which conveys its character in an abstract way even to visitors to the gallery who have never been to Australia. They use the conventional signs of the maps of the ancestors' dreaming in a way which provides a completely new set of images in the inventive progress of twentieth-century visual art. They demonstrate how a newcomer from a non-metropolitan culture can explode into the jaded field of vision of spectators in Western galleries by using an innovative set of visual elements derived from their own very ancient culture.

However, the repetition of discrete elements in a variety of combinations is the basic foundation of twentieth-century



*Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Honey Ant Dreaming*

Western art, originating perhaps in the Blaue Reiter artists' preoccupation with analogies between visual art and music. It takes comparative newcomers like the modern Aboriginal artists to revivify this concern of early twentieth-century Western artists and to demonstrate their universal validity. Their colours seem to be specific to their environment in the Western Central Desert of Australia, but they demonstrate how they can be composed in the service of revelatory experience by repeating the same collection of motifs in ever more surprising combinations.

It is probably a mistake to approach

these works by looking for hidden meanings. The artists themselves sometimes refer to ancestral traditions or to initiatory secrets which may not be completely revealed. They began doing this at the beginning of Pupunya art ten to fifteen years ago when they were using it especially to create an ethnic identity. It is not the narrative content, however, that haunts our imagination in these convincingly constructed works. The pieces which make up the jigsaw are not so much the references to a collection of esoteric law as the themes of huge symphonies of colour which must be perceived before they are conceived.

It is the Western search for concepts which probably accounts for the degeneration of work which is marketed by agents which seem to exploit its exotic 'secrets'. We have seen this process taking place in Africa. Makonde, Shona, and Oshogbo art are all examples of a degeneration which takes place when indigenous artists are encouraged to cater to the Western market's exploitation of a strange and unfamiliar set of images. The effects of the Western marketplace were to be seen in London recently in an exhibition of Aboriginal artists' paintings in the Mall Galleries. These artists had introduced detailed representations of insects, birds, and animals into their work in order to make the hidden meanings their patrons were seeking more explicit. In doing so they introduced alien forms which destroyed the visual experience they might otherwise have achieved by weaving the limited vocabulary of conventional signs into a singing tapestry of colour.

It is greatly to the credit of an artist like Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri that he has resisted this kind of prostitution in the marketplace and has continued to compose by limiting himself to a restricted number of shapes which can be orchestrated in mosaics of colour. These shift and change constantly while we look at them, but they have been subordinated to a unifying overall composition by an extraordinary sleight-of-hand.

Aboriginal Paintings at Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 14 June - 21 July, and at the Mall Galleries (Patrick Corbally Sourton) 6 - 11 June.

Dale Frank • Gunter Christmann, Geoff Weary

1 August to 18 August

22 August to 8 September

**ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY** Soudan Lane (off 27 Hampden Street) Paddington 2021 phone: 02 331 1919