

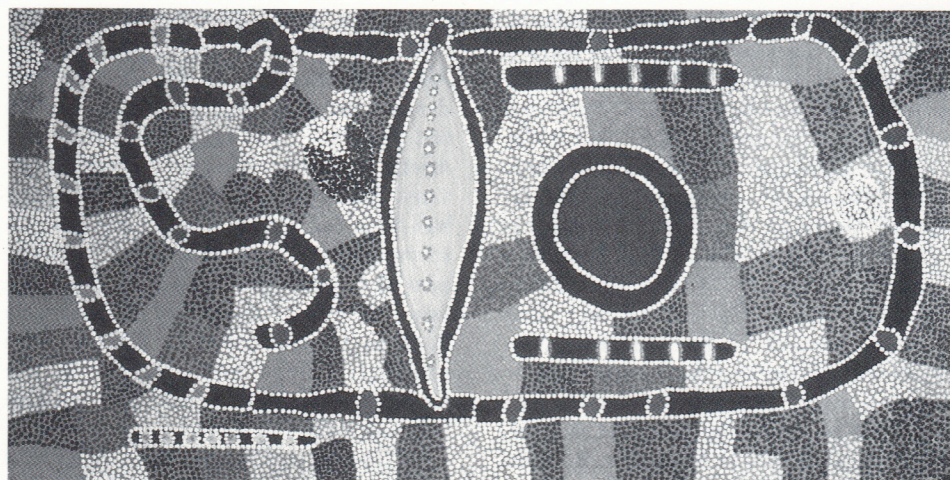
Rituals of life

Songlines/Broken English

JAMES BURR

Australian aboriginal art is not new to Europe, being known mainly from commercially produced dot, circle and line paintings in traditional earth colours. White dots in stereotypical patterns are repeated as often as the airport tourist trade demands. These are regarded as ethnic curiosities from a primordial people, rather than art of any visual significance. The exhibition 'Songlines' organized by Rebecca Hosack was startlingly different. Bold patterns in vivid colours assault the eye with as much dazzling power as European optical art, setting up chromatic vibrations in original flat decorative arrangements. These paintings are not abstract, but are a complex amalgam of conventionalized ideograms, many of which go back 40,000 years. They originated with tribesmen making marks in the sand and on their bodies, in ritualistic acts as important to their culture as song, dance and sacred ceremonies. These rituals link them spiritually to the land of their ancestors for which they have a mystical reverence.

The paintings and prints come from the Australian Western Desert, and their translation into the relative permanency of acrylic and oil on canvas was due to a teacher, Geoff Barton, who in the early 1970s introduced new materials and encouraged the Aboriginal artists to paint their 'Dreamtime'—myths of their ancestral origins and the inception of their world which they believe came into existence by the magic of song. The modern aboriginal artist is obsessive while painting: sitting on the ground and chanting, he or she uses a stick for making dots and brushes for larger areas of colour. A story which is vividly real is narrated, chronicled by a series of atavistic signs and symbols, many of which are decipherable. U-shapes are women sitting, concentric circles are waterholes, undulating lines represent rivers, animals are defined by the imprints they leave on the ground, and snakes appear often as symbols of danger or evil spirits. The meticulously constructed patterns are organically related to their immediate landscape (Fig. 1). A spirit 'Wirrimanu' camped here in the Dreamtime; the terrain, a rocky escarpment, is ideographically represented in a mosaic of dots, rich in colour, making an irregular chequer pattern. In contrast, serpentine movements give rhythmic energy to the composition, while the hypnotic black circle acts as a stabilizing focal point.



1 *Narmalook, near Balgo* by Bertha Naparrula (b. 1952), 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 100 × 50 cm

Instinctively the artist, Bertha Naparrula, has understood visually how to organize an image which has grown out of the need to tell a story that has perhaps been ritualistically told a thousand times. Concepts such as 'Water Dreaming', illusory to Western artists and to which it is problematic to give visual form, are conveyed by Ronnie Lawson in a few taut lines, and the sensation of longing for water is induced in the mind in the most imaginative way, with the absolute minimum of means in a masterly pictogram.

The release from the monochrome of sand painting has allowed a brilliant collective colour sense to flourish into intense chromatic vibrance. Lucy Yukenbarri's daring orchestration of oranges and yellows punctuated with black lines, culminates in a cool sharp green, a radiant colour sequence that celebrates the four water holes that her family used to use, the colours indicating where different types of wild food could be found. This emotional use of colour can be contrasted with the perfectly executed schema of dots whose carefully organized symmetrical structure is executed in the warm natural colours of earth and rock by Billy Stockman. The Aboriginal idiom is quite unrelated to any style in Western or Eastern Art, and stands alone as a vivid and unique language secured by its own sacred mythology, precious to the aboriginal tribesman and a revelation to Western eyes.

If revelation is essential to art, it was not to be found in a selection of eight young English artists, six of whom were from Goldsmith's College and all in their twenties. Ian Davenport resorts to dripping paint, allowing gravity to make regular and monotonous patterns for him, whose repetitious effects are limited and trivial. Rachel Whiteread takes plaster casts of simple domestic objects using the negative shapes: in this case the result is unmitigatedly dull. Both these artists have been nominated for this year's Turner Prize, which in itself is an indictment on the confused values permeating contemporary art. With a disarming lack of originality, Sarah Station laid out a Union Jack made from glass chippings in the garden of the Serpentine Gallery. This naïve indulgence had grandiloquent claims in the catalogue that 'the notion of national identity is itself a myth that tells more lies than truths'—an idea for which the artist had failed to find any transposition into an effective visual language. A written essay on the subject might have been more appropriate and indeed the exhibition was remarkable for its dispiriting inability to face the problem of how to express ideas in a visual language relevant to our time. Ironically the organizers changed the title from 'New British Art' to 'Broken English'—an unconscious but apt comment.

The exhibition 'Songlines' was held at The Concourse Gallery, Barbican, Centre, from 1 August–4 September. The exhibition 'Broken English' was held at the Serpentine Gallery from 1 August–1 September