

# Joining the dots on the landscape

British public galleries are only just beginning to take notice of the Aboriginals (one has even bought a painting). Yet, despite their poor showing, their influence is here for all to see  
**By Dalya Alberge**

COULD today's artists do for Aboriginal art what Gauguin, Giacometti and Picasso did for African and Oceanic art — and vice versa? Little over a century after primitive art came to Paris in an exhibition that was to change the course of Western art, major shows of Aboriginal art are coming to both the Hayward Gallery, London, and the Glasgow Museums (the latter being the first British public collection to purchase an Aboriginal painting).

Despite the poor exposure of Aboriginal art in Britain until now, a number of artists have been influenced by the Aboriginal painting and sculpture they have seen in Aus-



number of artists have been influenced by the Aboriginal painting and sculpture they have seen in Australia. The effect on them has been overwhelming:

#### ANDY GOLDSWORTHY

"When I went to Australia in 1991, the organisers of the Adelaide Festival suggested that I work in an Aboriginal community. I felt uncomfortable about that: it felt like colonialism. If the idea had come from the Aboriginals, it would have been different. I didn't want to be seen to be riding on their back.

"Although I didn't work directly with the Aboriginals, I was aware of being in an ancient landscape where they have lived for thousands of years. It's hard to put into words, but there is a wealth of feelings for the land that I feel and see in both my art and theirs. For example, this week, I've been working round a large red sandstone rock, creating an imprint of my body — like a shadow — by lying over the rock while it rains. I've made such works for many years and this week in the midst of making five shadows in five rain showers over four days, I received the Hayward show catalogue that shows figures engraved on a rock at Black Range, like rain shadows. The figures are almost empty — empty outlines, as are the rain shadows. They express something of the human presence in nature. A space that we fill for a while, then leave — that, although it dries out, erodes or blurs away, is not entirely lost either.

"I also made rain shadows in Australia. As I watched the dots of rain fall on the dry earth — creating an incredible intensity of colour — I could appreciate the deep significance of rain in such a dry country. The dots of rain over the landscape were as dots of paint in an Aboriginal painting."

#### LUKE ELWES

"I went to the Australian desert in the late 1980s with the classic European idea of what a desert would be like — forbidding and lifeless. So it was an incredible inspiration when I first got to Alice Springs after it had just rained and the whole of the desert was carpeted with flowers. As I flew in, I looked down on a mosaic of patterns. The desert was alive and anthropomorphic. I found this completely different way of looking at the landscape in Aboriginal art.

"I became fascinated by the Papunya artists in central Australia, by their visual language that could be so reduced yet so powerfully expres-



Aboriginal rock engraving at Black Range (top), Hayward, and a Goldsworthy rain shadow work (above). Top right: a 1922 work by an unknown Aboriginal artist, Hayward, and Liddell's *Odd Couple* (right)

sive. Circles can be hills or wells, or nothing more complicated than points in a man's life. They can be conceptual — a journey through time; or specific — maps or routes.

"Aboriginal art was for me a catalyst, a different way of seeing landscape. In the West, it's something decorative around us, something we can order and control. Out there, you're forced to see yourself as part of it."

#### CARO LIDDELL

"I worked for six months in Australia's Northern Territory, about four years ago. I spent time with an Aborigine called Bill Harney, who took me out to his ancestral territory, showed me paintings, and told me the Aboriginal stories. I was captivated by the Mimi spirit who frightens naughty children and eats them, and the Lightning Man, who crashes together the axes on his feet and elbows to make lightning. I've since taken some of these stories and interpreted them in my own way."

#### ALAN DAVIE

"The Aborigine has been in Australia for 50,000 years. Artefacts from the earliest period are almost the same as when the white man arrived. Yet the art seems both timeless and modern.

"In my paintings, I find myself producing symbols — like spirals, serpents and zig-zags — almost instinctively. What surprised me initially was finding these symbols in primitive art — not just in the art of the Australian Aborigines, but in that of the Carib Indians and the Pictish tribes in Scotland.

"There's one work of mine that was very directly inspired by an Aboriginal work — *Homage to Homo Australis* — a transcription from an Australian cave painting. But it's one of the few which I've recreated almost directly. In other works, it's more the idea of feeling at one with nature, the idea of art conveying something of its magic. I feel I'm on the same wavelength."

#### CHRIS DRURY

"It is the Aborigines' total involvement with the land that most interests me. For them, there is no separation between land and culture, culture and art. I make sculptures — primarily shelters and cairns — in the landscape. It is like a bow to a time and an amazing place. "Like the Aborigines, I find there is an aspect of ritual in the act of making something. And, like them, I generally destroy or dismantle my works."

#### TIM JOHNSON

"Seeing Aboriginal art and going to the Western desert gave me a new way of seeing painting: putting a narrative into apparently abstract images was a breakthrough for me. I met the artists, became friends with them, and started collecting their work. I've worked with Clifford Possum, possibly one of the best-known Aboriginal artists: last week, he put dots on my painting, and I put them on his. It's my way of showing that Aboriginal art is contemporary art in the wider sense."

□ Hayward Gallery (071-928 3002), 23 July-10 Oct (catalogue, £19.95). There are several Aboriginal shows in Glasgow: 041-357 3929. A good, concise study of Aboriginal Art has been published by Thames and Hudson, £6.95

□ Goldsworthy exhibits at Lancaster University until 13 Aug; Elwes is at Galerie Vieille du Temple, Paris, to 25 July; Liddell is at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery; Davie is at the Barbican, to 5 Sept; Drury is at Rebecca Hossack in Oct; Johnson is at Kelvingrove, Glasgow, 3 Sept-14 Nov

□ Selling shows: Rebecca Hossack (071-409 3599) to end Sept; Corbally Stourton (071-734 8903), 28 July-mid Sept

