

# Boomeranged into the

## ART

### John McEwen on the art of the first Australians

**A**RATJARA means "art of the first Australians" and is the title and subject of the first public exhibition in Europe to place this work in an artistic rather than scientific context. The exhibition has been selected by Bernard Lüthi, a Swiss artist, and has already been a great success in Germany. It can now be seen at the Hayward Gallery (until October 10; sponsored by Lufthansa).

The show is difficult to encompass because it invites several interpretations. We are encouraged to consider it as art, and indeed much of it seems to have been made as "Art" for the benefit of Westerners. Bark paintings, for instance, were invented for this purpose in the last century and used as barter for bottles of grog — as fatal a temptation for the aborigines of Australia as for peoples elsewhere. And the acrylic dot paintings on canvas, which have become the hallmark of the aboriginal style, were invented round about the time Evonne Goolagong won Wimbledon. Where the old painters bartered for grog, their descendants now command high prices in the auction rooms.

But what has this to do with aboriginal culture? Take the idea of "Dreaming", central to an understanding of virtually all the objects on view. "One can more or less imagine what 'Dreaming' is: that link between the individual and his land, between the clan and its territory. The paintings show figured spaces representing spaces both physical and mental, but it is difficult to go much further than that," writes Jean-Hubert Martin in the catalogue.

Many of the objects, especially in the first part of the show, might just as well be found in the Museum of Mankind. The imagery is limited in both subject and colour — a familiar litany of snakes, reptiles and the odd bird and fish in earth hues of yellow, brown, black and white. Here is criss-cross decoration



'There is no discernible difference between, say, an emu or a turtle or a snake doing

reminiscent of Javanese batik; there a bird straight out of a New England folk-art shop. There are none of the terrors of jungle art and few surprises apart from the variety of the burial poles from the Melville and Bathurst islands, and a surprising head carved out of spongy-looking grey coral. Great claims are made for the diversity of the exhibition as a whole, but by any normal standard it is reticent and one-paced. Much of the work is more to do with craft than art, fabrication than imagination. Exciting it is not.

Time stands still. There is no discernible difference between, say, an emu or a turtle or a snake doing a century ago, which is the date of some of the earliest objects on view, and one done today; and, awesome thought, nothing to suggest this has not been the way of things for the 40-60,000 years that the aborigines have been in Australia. Their "dreaming" may be deep but it is

also inert, immemorally undisturbed.

*The Killing of Lumaluma* was done by Danny Djorlom Nalorlman in 1988 and *Banumbirr the Morning Star* by Jack Wunuwun in 1987; but how long ago did the ancestral giant travel through Kunwinjku country carrying sacred objects, stealing and devouring women? When did the spirits of the Bralgu, land of the dead, first put Nanumbirr in a dilly bag? And what is a dilly bag?

The exhibition is sparing of labelled information deliberately to disassociate itself from an ethnological reading by letting the objects speak for themselves. It could do with more in the way of explanatory captions. As it is one wanders as intellectually lost as one would no doubt physically be in the Australian hinterland.

This does not apply in the startlingly figurative case of the painting *My Country*, 1992, by Ginger Riley Munduwalawala. At the

opening several people remarked that it reminded them of a David Hockney. That is unfair to both artists. Ginger Riley may have seen David Hockney's work, but his painting has a lavish colour and expansive graphic invention that transcends any influence. It is the first sign in the show of the extent to which living aboriginal artists have adapted to modern international demands.

The work of city aborigines is even more indebted to Westernisation — hackneyed stuff, for the most part, abandoning any vestige of originality for an ersatz style. Some posters touch on the growing political rights movement, one a reminder that it was not until 1944 that aborigines received Australian citizenship. Prior to that date they had been considered part of the zoology.

Just recently things have taken a dramatic turn, unimaginable even a few years ago. Thanks to a ruling in the Australian High Court

# e modern world



one a century ago and one done today': *Hunting Story*, 1988, by Sambo Burra Burra

some Murray Islanders have for the first time since the settlement won back the ownership of their ancestral land on grounds of "native entitlement". As a result similar claims are being filed across the continent.

"If the decision stands Australia could go back to being a Stone Age culture of 200,000 people living on witchetty grubs!" one mining analyst has said, summing up the worst scenario. He need not worry. The exhibition is part of this independence movement, but the very acceptance of aboriginal culture by public Western galleries is an assimilation as threatening as the old neglect.

**T**HIS difference is most dramatically displayed upstairs in Room 9. On every wall are museum-sized dot paintings. In common with the rest of the exhibition the room represents artists from a particular geographical location, in this

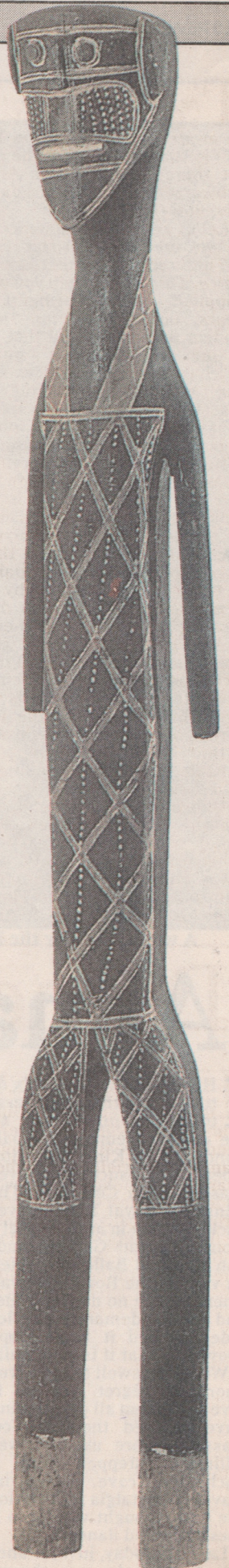
case the desert areas of central Australia. The work derives from the sacred observances of body and ground painting and the decoration of objects for daily and ceremonial use. The men alone used to do this but this taboo has now been broken; the number of women in the show proves to what a degree this is the case.

With few exceptions the exhibition has been selected from works made as art for the Western market and not for any religious or ceremonial purpose. The brightly coloured acrylic dot paintings on canvas in Room 9 are the secular, commercial versions of the ancient symbolic paintings. Here are some of the big-leaguers of aboriginal art, from the robustly iconographic Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri, via the subtle layering in dot and line of Emily Kame Ngwarreye to the slick snake mosaic of Pansy Napangati. This room is a world away from the humble references to

emus, turtles and fish at the outset. Its paintings would fit like a glove in the lobby of any bank in the world.

I was angered by the show at first, thinking it the final nail in a coffin. But now I see it differently. In 20 years the aborigines have evolved quicker than in the past 60,000. They are not "abos" any more but "Ozzies", maybe the first ones, but "Ozzies" none the less. And they are delighted. They are right to be. The magic went out of their life the moment Captain Cook set foot in their inhospitable Eden 200 years ago.

Rebecca Hossack has been the pioneer dealer of aboriginal art in this country and has shows complementing and, in some cases, supplementing the Hayward, at 197 Piccadilly, SW1, and 35 Windmill Street, W1, until mid-October. Here are such omissions from the Hayward selection as the Lajamanu School and the arresting, tentacled imagery of Eunice Napangati, Pansy's sister.



Moky Figure, 1960, by an unknown artist