



STORYTIME: Rainbow Serpent At Pikilli (1989), a painting by Pansy Napangati on show at the Hayward Gallery

Secrets in the sands of time

THERE is a passage in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* where an art dealer from Adelaide is visiting an Aboriginal painter. "So what's the story, Winston?" she asks. "What story?" he growls. "The story of the painting. You know I can't sell a painting without a story." She eventually gleans enough information to string together an entirely erroneous explanation of what the painting is about. "I see," she says. "The ancient white-bearded Ancestor, dying of thirst, is trudging home across a glittering salt-pan and finds, on the farther shore, a plant of pitjurie . . . Yes, that's nice. That'll make a nice beginning." Like any abstract art, Aboriginal painting is subject to muddled interpretations. But because it represents a way of thinking so different from our own — one that is cryptic and riddled with stories, totems and taboos — even an accurate interpretation can be baffling. "Aboriginal paintings are like poetry," says Rebecca Hossack, the leading promoter of Aboriginal art in this country. "You cannot tie them down to any specific meaning."

Two exhibitions of Aboriginal art in London next month, one at the Hayward Gallery, South Bank, and another at Hossack's gallery in St James's, will not only reveal the delicacy and sophistication of paintings by people so long dismissed as stone-age dipsomaniacs, but also shed light on some of the complex beliefs that underpin their way of life.

Aboriginal art comes in many forms. Paintings on rock and bark and human bodies, markings in the sand, collages of fluff and feathers, engraved bowls, shields and boomerangs — all form the backbone to an artistic tradition that goes back 50,000 years. But what is stirring hearts and pockets at the moment is not ancient Aboriginal art but the paintings of the last 20 years. Official recognition of Aboriginal culture in the sixties and seventies, and the government grants given to encourage Aborigines to paint, have sparked a bush-fire of creative enterprise.

Broadly speaking, modern Aboriginal art divides into two types: one is politically-charged, figurative, and European in style, executed by "urban" Aborigines, and dealing with issues such as identity, dispossession and broken families. The other, easily identifiable thanks to its "dotted" technique, is rooted in the land, steeped in ancient beliefs and painted by Aborigines of the desert. This variety is enjoying increasing popularity in Europe and the United States: something which Hossack attributes in part to its similarity to Western genres of painting and its "superficial resemblance to Op-art, Pop-art and Pointillism". Central to Aboriginal painting is the Dreamtime: their notion of how the world began. To Aborigines, the secret of creation lies below the land — not in the skies, as in European tradition. Animals and plants, they

believe, came up through the earth's crust. Even the sun came from underground. Having struggled to the surface, spirits representing all natural phenomena from bolt lightning to wallabies and emus embarked on journeys across the earth's crust. Their route was marked by great upheavals in the earth's surface and the creation of gorges, mountains and pools. Dreamings, the name given to the stories that describe these ancestral travels, are handed down orally from generation to generation — and form the subject-matter for most Aboriginal painting. Such an elaborate system of beliefs makes the titles of paintings confusing. For instance, a painting entitled *A Kangaroo Dreaming*, featured in the Hayward show, is not a portrait of some somnolent marsupial but an elaborate history of how the kangaroo came into existence and the rocks and gorges in which its spirit still lives.

One of the intriguing features of Aboriginal art is the way it reflects this absorption with the land. Everything is seen in aerial view. All beasts are represented not in three or even two dimensions but by the paw-prints they leave in the sand. Man is represented by a shape like a boomerang because that is the shape he leaves in the sand having been sitting crossed-legged. Apart from the aesthetic allure of Aboriginal art, it is important as the only permanent record of the Dreamings, for which no written accounts exist. The dots and concentric motifs relate directly to the symbols made in the sand during ceremonies where the stories are revealed to initiates. Not all members of the tribe are privy to all the Dreamings and symbols. Some are only for men; others only for women and children. Often the artist won't divulge the meanings. When Aborigines first sold paintings, secret symbols that had been closely guarded from whites and other members of the tribe for millennia were suddenly available for all to see. Now specially appointed Aboriginal "police" vet all those paintings being sold, and one of the reasons for the preponderance of dots is that they make the symbols harder to find. Like in a colour-blindness test, they get lost in the chromatic miasma.

CATHERINE MILNER



STEPS FORWARD: dancers in the Corroboree, a "celebratory coming together"

Hayward Gallery, London. *Aratjara: Art Of The First Australians*. July 23 to October 10, 1993.

Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 197 Piccadilly, London. July 1 to September and at 35 Windmill Street,