



Songlines across Europe

*A major touring exhibition is setting Aboriginal art on the world cultural stage. Sadly, **JUDY PEEBUS** reports, it will not be seen in Australia.*

I am trying to paint the one painting that will change the world, before which even the most narrow-minded and rabid racists will fall to their knees in profound awareness and spiritual openness, thus recognising their own stupidity, at once transcending it to become (...). Of course, this is in itself stupid and I am a fool but I think to myself, what have I got to lose by trying?

Gordon Bennet in 'Aratjara: Art of the First Australians'

AN AUSTRALIAN friend explained to me why Aborigines are called "boongs" 10 years ago on a bushwalking trip in the Bogong high plains. "That's the sound they make

big bosses and the fathers in chains, the dog collars, the petrol sniffers, the deaths in custody. But the exhibition is not only about pain. 'Aratjara' is also about perseverance and courage.

The central message is that these works are world-class art. This is certainly apparent in the bark paintings from semi-traditional areas in Arnhem Land and the "dot" paintings from the Western Desert. But it is equally true of urban art by a group belonging to what Neville Bonner terms the "legion of the lost".

That became immediately clear when 'Aratjara' was shown for the first time in Europe at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Dusseldorf. It was here that German gallery director Ulrich Krempel had accepted the challenge inherent in any encounter with

when they hit the bullbar of a four-wheel-drive," he said. I didn't get the joke at first. And I didn't understand why not. Had my time in Europe caused me to lose touch with the people and the local lingo I'd grown up with?

Ten years later, my own 'songline' had brought me to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek near Copenhagen. Coincidentally, the major retrospective of Aboriginal art I had come here to see had also taken 10 years to reach this place on the Danish coast. But my feeling of satisfaction was short-lived. I felt humbled before the suffering embodied in the works in 'Aratjara: Art of the First Australians'.

"We have survived. We are here," cried former Aboriginal Arts Board Director, Gary Foley, at the opening of 'Aratjara' in Denmark. But it was not as a victor that he stood there before the impressive showpiece of the exhibition, 'Jardiwarnpa Jukurpa'. The bitterness ran too deep.

'Aratjara' explores dark territory: the

the aesthetic product of another culture. "How does one read 'different' pictures?" he asked in a catalogue essay. Krempel's dilemma applies also to contemporary works by Africans, Asians or native Americans, but in the case of Aboriginal art, the gap is even bigger.

The major 'Dreamings' exhibition of Western Desert paintings that stunned the American art world in 1988 had bypassed Europe. A year later, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Jean-Hubert Martin sparked interest in — and controversy — "other" art, while gallery-owner Rebecca Hossack had done some groundwork in the United Kingdom with exhibitions like the 'Songlines'. But apart from a collection of bark paintings left behind in Paris and Basel by Czech surrealist Karel Kupka in the early 1960s, the European continent was largely uninitiated.

In 'Art of Australia', Robert Hughes wrote that Australia never had a Delacroix. Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton had the right stuff but they came

somewhat later. It was with some scepticism, therefore, that I had approached the "most comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art ever to tour Europe" at Dusseldorf early last year. Only a decade or two ago, Aboriginal artworks were left to collect dust in ethnological museums or sold to curious tourists for ready cash.

Nobody had heard of schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon, whose experiments with acrylic paints and linen in the mid-1970s were to put Papunya, Central Australia, on the international art map. At the time the collection was being prepared for what is now the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, the art of Australia's indigenous peoples — the Kooris, the Nyungar, the Nunga, the Yolngu, the Murri and the Anangu — was dismissed as inferior and irrelevant, or ignored altogether.

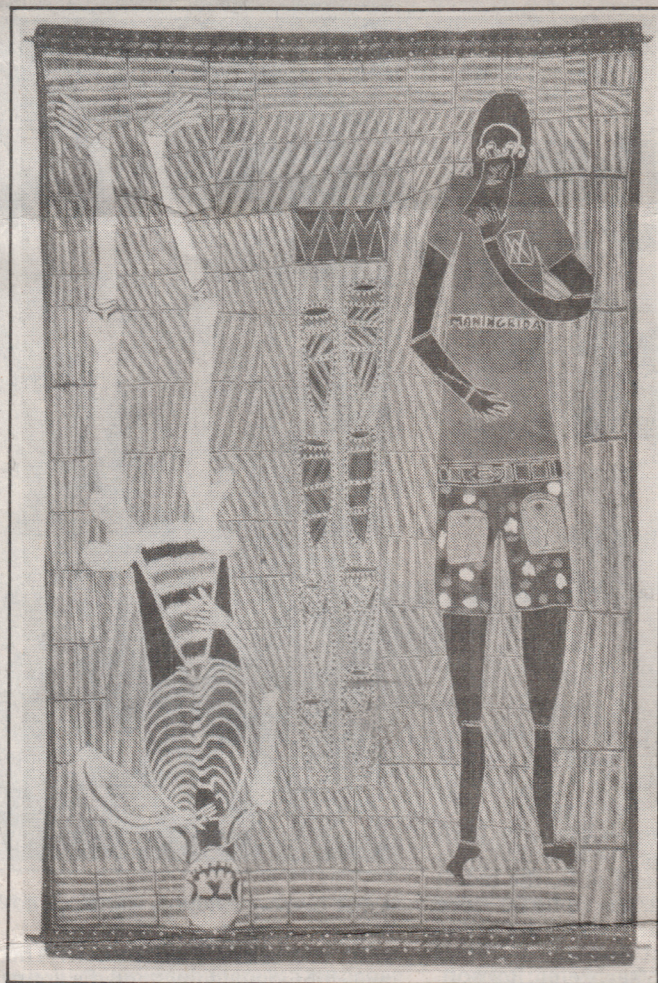
Today the National Gallery boasts a fine collection of bark paintings and western Desert acrylics, as well as one of the most moving monuments of our time — the Aboriginal Memorial. Eu-

rope's leading economic weekly, 'The Economist', is comparing Central Australian communities like Papunya and Yuendumu to Montmartre. There have been other favorable responses. 'Aratjara' is of a calibre to impress even a jaded European public.

Attendance figures so far endorse this. In Dusseldorf, 'Aratjara' drew 55,000 visitors. At its second stop at London's Hayward Gallery, it attracted 45,000 people, outperforming Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd in the 'Angry Penguins' show at the same venue in 1988. The 'Aratjara' catalogue was sold out last year in London. The same may happen in Denmark. Curator Hugo Arne Buch is expecting 150,000 visitors from throughout Scandinavia over the next three months.

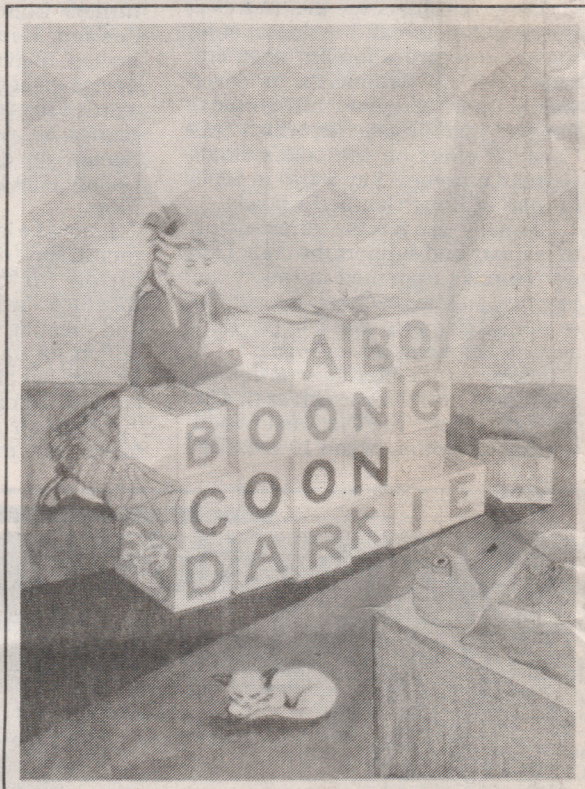
Not everybody has jumped on to the Aboriginal bandwagon. One British critic termed it the most boring art in the world. Another dismissed its appeal, arguing it goes "too well" with Scandinavian furniture. Some found the urban art too "untraditional".

But mostly, 'Aratjara' struck a



Dark territory explored: 'Petrol Sniffer' by Les Midikuria, 1988.

'Women's Ceremony': by Lilly Kemarre, 1988



'Daddy's Little Girl': watercolor on paper by Gordon Bennett and Eugene Carchesio, 1989.

The statement was too powerful, or perhaps the time was not yet ripe. In any case, funds failed to materialise. Innumerable false starts followed. Then, their plan for cross-continental dialogue was given a new lease of life in 1989 through revived German interest, prompted, to some extent at least, by growing racial tensions in that country. From his base in Dusseldorf, Luthi plied back and forth between potential lending institutions, sponsors and venues and finally found a sympathetic listener in Ulrich Krempel, the then director of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. Commitments from the Hayward Gal-

The icons of the "legion of the lost" offered insight into an unfamiliar struggle.



lery in London, the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek and the Kunsthaus in Zurich soon followed. And the National Gallery of Victoria, which had lent 25 works to the touring exhibition, was to host the grand finale.

If Murphy's rule prevailed before 'Aratjara' left Australia's shores, it has been no less prevalent since it started its odyssey throughout Europe. Zurich pulled out at the last minute and the works were forced to go into hibernation during the European winter.

A fresh setback awaited on its reappearance in Humlebaek, where Gary Foley told the international press the exhibition would not be shown in Australia after all. The official reason cited was funding problems, but there were difficulties in negotiation with Dusseldorf too. An alternative Aboriginal art exhibition, 'The Power of the Land', has been slotted into the hole left by 'Aratjara' later this year, drawn from the NGV's own collection. Perhaps Australian art gallery directors don't like Swiss artists telling them what they should show.

The reason why 'Aratjara' will not be bringing its message home — at least not to Australia — is largely irrelevant, however. What it is really communicating is that the struggle goes on.

Some of the borders are breaking down. 'Aratjara' may not have initiated a wave of critical overviews of particular Aboriginal artists or exhibitions with succinct themes. But there is interest: a buyers' market is emerging and sculptures from Maningrida in Arnhem Land now stand alongside Andy Warhol's works in a select number of leading commercial art galleries in Germany and Switzerland.

It is ironic that people throughout Europe were learning to read and unravel the meaning of Aboriginal art, while Melburnians were flocking to see Van Gogh. Van Gogh was ignored in his lifetime. It is to be hoped the same fate does not befall some of Australia's unique and talented artists. Their works carry a universal beauty. Moreover, their political message remains relevant as long as young women grow up in sheltered tracts of Australian suburbia, learning to spell words like "boong" but not knowing their meaning.

A reference to Gordon Bennett: 'The Nine Ricochets' ('Fall Down Black Fella Jump Up White Fella'), 1990.

responsive chord. Modern abstract art had prepared European visitors for the spirituality of the barks and the intellectuality of the dot paintings. The icons of the "legion of the lost" offered insight into an unfamiliar struggle. Moreover, closer study reveals different schools and individual talents. "These are not 'timeless' works but the innovative creative statements of individual artists exploring their own culture," wrote Sue Hubbard in 'New Statesman and Society'.

THIS was precisely the response Swiss curator Bernhard Luthi was hoping for

when he conceived 'Aratjara' 10 years ago with Gary Foley, the head of the Aboriginal Art Unit at that time. A respected artist in his own right, Luthi had been struck by the power and the diversity of Aboriginal art before it even became fashionable to talk about individual styles. Foley was infected by Luthi's enthusiasm and added a dose of his own. Aware that the Aborigines would be opposed to the bicentenary celebrations in 1988, Foley and Luthi conspired to give Aboriginal artists the opportunity to commemorate this painful historic encounter outside Australia.