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## Aboriginal Art

keeping the dreaming alive



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# KEEPING THE DREAMING ALIVE

Tens of thousands of years old and still going strong, Aboriginal art is proving itself a force in modern art. ALEX TIBBITTS reports.

**‘UGLY’** is how one person described the art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri when his exhibition opened in London this month.

Well, art is subjective and people are allowed an opinion, so I wouldn't have taken any notice except that the person is in the habit of promoting the Aboriginal cause.

The conversation was “off the record” and the person wouldn't elaborate, but from comments they had made earlier I presumed they felt the work of Possum — and other contemporary Aboriginal artists — had been contaminated by Western influence, having been taken out of its original context and presented on canvas.

And that's exactly the point. Possum feels by using canvas he can make a permanent interpretation of the stories told to him by his grandmother and grandfather of the Dreamtime — the mythology which defines the Aboriginal way of life, their history, their customs, their law — and take them to the world.

A Papunya Tula artist from Central Australia's Western Desert, Possum feels his only compromise to Western art is using canvas. Although he paints with acrylics, he uses the traditional “blackfella” colours like ochre and steers clear of “whitefella” colours of blue and green.

“That Dreaming been there all the time. From our early days, before the European people came up, that Dreaming carry on. Old people carry on this law, business, schooling for the young people. Grandfather and grandmother, uncle and aunt, mummy and father, all that — they be carry on this, teach ‘em all the young boys and girls. They been using the dancing boards, spear, boomerang — all painted. And they been using them on the body different times. Kids, I see them all the time — painted. All the young fellas, they go hunting, and the old people there — they do sand painting. They put down all the story, same like I do on canvas,” Possum told Dr Vivien Johnson, a senior lecturer in sociology who has written extensively on Possum (and, among other things, cult Sydney band Radio Birdman).

And while Dreamtime stories may be the common heritage of the tribe, it is the artist's interpretation of those stories that makes the artwork.

“The European art world don't understand the individual in the Aboriginal art world. I've got to make my work look as my own. I've got to have my own idea. I've got to have my own originality. I can't make it look exactly like anybody else's,” another Aboriginal artist, Banduk Marika, told Johnson.

“That's the whole point of Aboriginal art — each artist, you have to have your own style — not have to but you create your own style — as you learn it. Like with the dancing — if you're going to re-enact the brolga, you become a brolga — exactly, her

**Western modernism certainly has no equivalent for the complex mental space of the Clifford Possum presently housed in the Pacific Asia Museum in Los Angeles.**

movements and everything. You re-enact a spirit, you've got to become that. You forget you're human.

“The dancing and the art is your whole life — you have to know your traditional artwork that ties in with the land that ties in with the creation — and where your boundary is, how far you ancestral creator travelled — it is all written in the art. That's what the traditional art means: the owner of the land. To a white man it mightn't look a pretty thing, but it's more than just art, it's everything tied in with how people are now and where we came from.”

Possum's paintings of the Dreamings involve a complex combination of landscape, time and symbolism, which he has developed over many years.

Ask the remarkably well-preserved 65 year old if he likes being able to take his permanent record of the Dreamtime around the world, and his face lights up and he laughs with hilarity. No more needs to be said.

And his work will get even greater exposure after British Airways bought one of his works this month for the livery of their planes flying the Australian route — which should further infuriate the ‘purists’.

But how would you define ‘pure’ Aboriginal art? It would be naive to think that Aboriginal art did not evolve in the 100,000 years before the arrival of the Europeans, and it is still evolving. The only difference is that it is now evolving in a Western context.

“In all societies in all points in time art systems are changing. People are using and developing new technologies,” says Howard Morphy, Professor of Social Anthropology at University College London.

“Aboriginal people are part of contemporary Australia. It would be absurd if they weren't using the kinds of new technologies that they encounter in their daily lives. It would be quite wrong to describe Aboriginal art as authentic if they only produced something they produced

100 or 600 years ago. That would be absurd, that would mean that no contemporary European culture would ever have any authenticity. There would be no such thing as an authentic white Australian work of art, which is clearly nonsense.

“The idea is to avoid distancing it [Aboriginal art], in particular in time by saying, you know, ‘Western Desert art must be prior to ...’ and therefore saying, ‘God, they shouldn't be painting in acrylics,’ because you get all sorts of very illogical arguments.”

It would be illogical to assume that Aboriginals could — or even want to — live in isolation from today's world which is becoming increasingly smaller with technology. Possum certainly doesn't want to live in a time-warp.

Born circa 1932, Possum worked as a stockman in his traditional lands of Central Australia's Western Desert, which helped him in his role as custodian of several Dreaming sites.



Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri at the opening of his exhibition in London. Photo: Mette Kristiansen.  
 Below: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Lightning Dreaming*.



In the '50s Possum shunned Aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira's Aranda art school which painted Western Desert landscapes in a "European" style, preferring to pursue traditional wood carving until the boom in the early '70s of Papunya Tula art (named after the Aboriginal settlement Papunya).

Having moved from his traditional home in the Western Desert to Alice Springs in the '80s, Possum's vision of Australia is a country where "blackfella" and "whitefella" live as "one".

Similarly, Morphy wants to see Aboriginal art and modern European-Australian art considered together under the one umbrella of contemporary Australian art.

"Aboriginal art is something produced in the contemporary context of Australia. If you accept that what Aboriginal people are producing is contemporary Australian art and what European Australians of different backgrounds are producing is contemporary Australian art, then they naturally go together," says Morphy, who is organising an exhibition of contemporary Australian art at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art

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which will place Aboriginal art alongside other Australian contemporary art.

"If you exclude them, then you're actually making a decision that somehow there is a difference, and usually that kind of difference isn't specified and that just goes back to the whole issue of race. The whole idea of the exhibition is that race as such is not a good criteria.

"Many of the artists in the exhibition — people like Fiona Foley and Judy Watson — would be people who have been to art school in some Australian cities who are Aboriginal people and who themselves go on voyages of exploration. So in their lives Aboriginal art and other contemporary art wouldn't be divided in that particular way."

If you start isolating Aboriginal art from the rest of the country, then you would also be losing a significant cultural wealth.

"If you look up in the dictionary of art, the great Macmillan work, there are probably as many if not more Aboriginal artists included in it as there are white Australian ones," says Morphy, "and certainly the number of pages devoted to Aboriginal art are identical to the number of pages devoted to Australian art in general. And that gives you an idea of global importance," said Morphy.

Some would go further, saying that the complexity of Aboriginal art is more advanced than modern art.

Commenting on the work of Possum, Johnson wrote: "All Papunya paintings depict ambiguously actual geographical locations, the narrative line of the Dreamings associated with these places and the contemporary ceremonials in which these connections are celebrated. These diverse contents are fused into a coherent visual presentation using a code of abstract symbolism which makes Western experiments in abstraction from Kandinsky look pretty naive.

"Western modernism certainly has no equivalent for the complex mental space of the Clifford Possum presently housed in the Pacific Asia Museum in Los Angeles."

You have plenty of opportunity to make your own judgment in England, with several major exhibitions of Aboriginal art scheduled for the summer. **TNT**

● In London, there will be three exhibitions at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery (35 Windmill Street, W1, 0171-436 4899):

Clifford Possum shows until July 5;

"The Milky Way Dreaming" features the art of Pitjantjatjara Aborigines from July 7-August 2;

"Injalak: X-Ray Show" features the art of Aborigines from the town of Gunbalanya from August 5-September 6.

In Middlesex, "Aboriginal Art At Osterley Park" shows at the National Trust property in Isleworth. Call 0171-436 4899 for details.

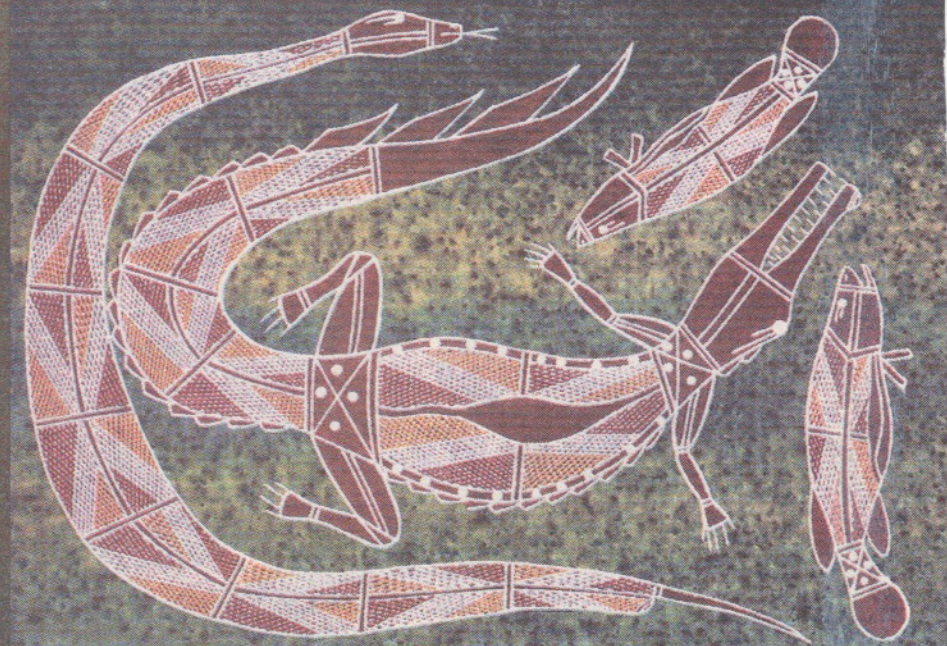
In Oxford, "In Place (Out Of Time): Contemporary Art In Australia" shows from July 20-November 2 at the Museum Of Modern Art, 30 Pembroke St (01865-722 733).



Malcolm Jagamarra's Milky Way Dreaming will be displayed as part of the "Milky Way Dreaming" exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery from July 7-August 2.



Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's Possum And Rock Wallaby Dreaming is on display at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery until July 5.



Simon Badari's Crocodile Kings, Two Bream, Dunbuhmanj Snake will be displayed as part of the "Injalak: X-Ray Show" exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery from August 5-September 6.