

Visual Art

Tracks: Land and Landscape in Aboriginal Art

Rebecca Hossack Gallery – throughout the festival

Aboriginal art is full of interesting paradoxes. It is both the most ancient art movement in the world and the newest. Its iconography, its forms, its subject matter date back many, many millennia. And yet as a modern art movement, producing works on canvas and paper that can be exhibited in galleries, and hung on walls. Aboriginal art only really began in the second half of the Twentieth Century. There are rock paintings dating back over fifty thousand years, but most of the early aboriginal art forms wood carvings made only for the duration of a particular ceremony.

To western eyes contemporary aboriginal paintings can often appear as glorious abstract patterns, and yet to the artist they represent something between an Ordnance Survey map, the book of Genesis, and the Good Food Guide. Marks, dots, blobs, stripes and circles that seem purely decorative are in fact signs and symbols rich in meaning.

Almost all aboriginal painting is a record of the artist's country – the land of which he or she is the custodian. The picture will record not merely the land's physical aspect but also its mythological one. Aboriginal culture is wonderfully rich in creation stories – every feature of the landscape was created by some mystic being or ancestor in an ancient – but still living – past known to us as the Dreamtime. To paint a landscape an aboriginal artist will record the creation-story along with its terrestrial residue.

Although certain elements of these Dreamtime stories are common to all aboriginals, aboriginal culture is not homogenous, nor is the art it produces. Aboriginal Australia is a continent – like Europe. It is made up of many different nations. There are many different nations. There are many different languages, different physiognomies, different cultural traditions, different diets, different 'national' characteristics – and different ways and means of painting.

The coastal people of Arnhem Land in northern Australia produce

intricately cross-hatched paintings on bark using natural ochres. Contrary to popular belief these bark-paintings are not an 'authentic' indigenous art form. The movement developed during the 1950s in response to the desire of anthropologists and missionaries to take artefacts back home with them. The natives of Arnhem Land traditionally took refuge from the wet season in simple bark shelters and sometimes they would while away the hours decorating these shelters with little scenes drawn in ochre on the walls. These decorated slab-like bark walls could make an interesting souvenir – but a rather cumbersome one. It was a short step for the aboriginals – in response to the requests of westerners – to produce such scenes on small portable pieces of bark.

The story of how Geoffrey Bardon, a young Sydney art-teacher working at the aboriginal settlement of Papunya in the desert some 260 kilometers west of Alice Springs, encouraged some of the disaffected inhabitants to paint their stories in acrylic paint – first as a mural on the wall of the school house, and then on pieces of board – has been told often enough. It is fast becoming part of the mythology of Aboriginal art. By providing artists with a readily accessible medium he unleashed a Niagara of creative talent.

The example of Papunya was taken up in other aboriginal communities across Australia – at Balgo Hills, Yuendumu, Utopia, Turkey Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Haast's Bluff, Ngukurr and elsewhere – as the art movement spread and prospered. The power of the paintings was recognized almost immediately, and artistic success soon led to commercial success. After two centuries of marginalization - or worse – the Australian aboriginals at last had something that placed them at the centre of Australian life.

In 1995 I visited Emily Kame Kngwarreye at the outstation of Utopia, east of Alice Springs. Emily was a tiny woman then in her eighties. She was sitting in the dust and talking with great force as she stabbed at a large canvas with her huge paintbrush, slowly conjuring up a shimmering carpet of reds and pinks – a sort of desert Monet. She was one of Australia's most celebrated artists. She earned over AUS\$ 500,000 a year and – as she told me – owned more cars than she could remember. She was a source of wonder and succour to her extended family. Her young relatives would sometimes sweep by, lift her from the ground where she was painting, load her into the back their utility truck and drive her the 200 kilometres in to Alice Springs. There they would deposit her outside the newest jean-store, and offer her painting-services in exchange for clothes. She was a sort of human credit card.

Over the past twenty-eight years I have been exhibiting aboriginal art at my gallery in London. In that time the movement, rather than flagging, has grown in strength and vigour and diversity. A new and wonderful world of art has been revealed. The response to it in Britain has been both heartening and instructive. The critics – with a few honourable exceptions – have struggled to come to terms with the movement. Hamstrung by anxieties about their own ignorance or wary of the minefield of political correctness, they have anxiously dismissed the art as ‘ethnic franchising’ or ignored it all together. There has been almost no attempt to describe its variety and abundance. And yet, amongst the public, there has been an ever-broadening flood of interest, recognition that here is art of the highest order. It has made an appeal to the old, the young, the culturally informed and the first time viewer. – **Rebecca Hossack**

Bella Lane Embroidery

Rich Mix – June 12-14

