

Dreamtime awakening

ART

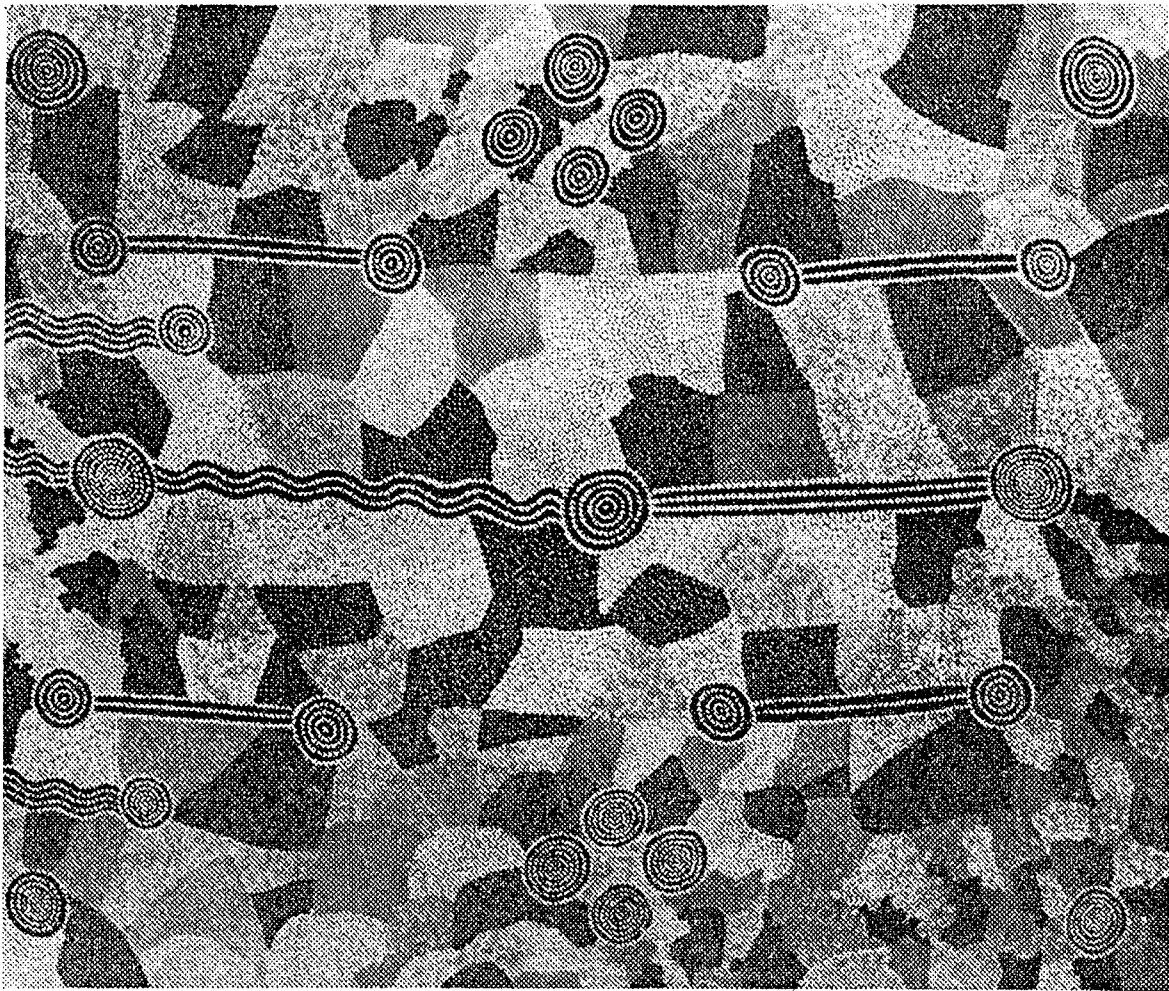
EVEN a cursory glance at the history of Australian art will reveal a dearth of artists prepared to engage in a radical critique of white Australians' treatment of the landscape.

Australian landscape art in the 200 years of European occupation has been celebratory in either a romantic or a possessive way: rarely have artists addressed themselves directly to the question of the efficacy of European modes of domination and exploitation of the landscape. At the same time, and to the continuing discredit of art historians and curators, a reading of Australian art history will reveal an almost total lack of interest in and a blind ignorance of the rich and complex tradition of landscape art as it has been practised by the indigenous people of this country.

Although a small and very selective exhibition, *Landscape (some interpretations)*, which is showing at the Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, University of Tasmania, Mt Nelson (until November 14), addresses itself to these questions with some rigor. Paul Zika, the exhibition co-ordinator, had gathered together paintings by Old Mick Tjakamarra and Max Tjampitjinpa, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, Don Tjungurrayi and Dick Pantimatu Tjupurrula, all of whom are artists of the Western Desert; as well, he has selected works by Virginia Coventry from her suite *Whyalla — Not a Document*, Adrian Hall's *2 Full Circles — Landscape with figures*, and Wally Barda's *A Memorial to the Battle at the Antipodes*. All are recent works.

The four paintings by the Papunya artists introduce us to the elaborate and subtle vocabulary of graphic elements employed by the artists of the Western Desert.

Once it is recognised that the paintings (traditionally ephemeral ground paintings) operate as complex mnemonics that will help illustrate significant events, sacred rituals and aspects of a person's or a tribe's history, then one quickly learns to appreciate the fact that these paintings exist on many levels. On the one hand, all four paintings read as plan (to be read from above) and quite literally they represent elements of particular land-



Old Mick Tjakamarra and Max Tjampitjinpa, "Anmatjira"

scapes. Old Mick Tjakamarra and Max Tjampitjinpa, for instance, in their joint painting depicting the rain mythology, represent sites in the Central Mount Wedge area. On the other hand, the paintings will represent complex mythological histories of the Dreamtime, as in Dick Pantimatu Tjupurrula's painting of the myth of the man Inkamula whose spell, sung against a wrongdoing, causes his adversaries to be poisoned by the kangaroo which they have eaten.

On a purely formal level all four works are striking; there is a boldness of design, a thoughtful disposition of dominant motifs and rich, vibrant surfaces, created by the pointillistic brush technique, which make them extremely satisfying to "read".

But it seems fair to say that the paintings take on real subtlety and complexity only when one begins to unravel the iconography; when one starts to come to some understanding of the works' sacred meaning, the meanings of their symbols, and their place within aboriginal culture.

In contrast to this intimate relationship with and understanding of the landscape, Virginia Coventry shows us the "Fruits" of capitalist enterprise in a powerful photographic study, *Hummock Hill*, a panoramic set of images which sweep across a land and seascape dominated by a giant hopper on one side and a pedestrian company township on the other. Man's endeavor sits uncomfortably in the landscape, photographed in characterless tones which emphasise the displaced values which the enterprise represents.

Open Cut — Iron Monarch, Coventry's other study, in contrasting man-made and natural landscape images, drives the point home. She is witness to what appears to be a bankrupt corporate ideology.

Adrian Hall's approach to landscape is very much more personal. Two photographic cycloramas, one of a splendid vista from Mount Wellington, the other a constricted urban landscape (presumably shot

from his Sydney studio window), complete with barbed wire and characterless, monotonous buildings, are enveloped by what appears to be an extravagant, painterly brushstroke which weaves an eloquent arabesque through the work. The brushstroke turns out to be made of fake grass (yet another illusion).

"Figures" express the relative states of the two landscapes. On the one hand, two figures observe the vista; on the other, three startling large format images of assorted gas-masks inform the urban landscape. The work is a powerful collision of opposites, with the urban sequence seeming to be observed as if from a bunker or an armored car.

Finally, Barda's *Memorial* seeks to set up the protagonists in a landscape battle which is far from settled — the battle between European-derived motifs, as exemplified by the golden cypress, and the indigenous flora and fauna, which are symbolised by the banksia. Barda, an

architect and landscape designer, has developed an elaborate and cunning war-game in plan form, which culminates in a sophisticated axonometric drawing which displays the careful positioning of each motif. The Memorial, with its observation platforms, lecture theatres and elaborate props is planned for an actual site, a disused army training camp at Wallgrove, NSW.

Although not a big exhibition, *Landscape* has been carefully assembled and provides the focus from some much-needed debate on the nature of landscape and the way in which Australians treat it. Certainly, the artists here call into serious question the free-wheeling exploitation which appears to characterise much of Western-dominated ideology at present.

— Jonathan Holmes.

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