

Alchemy and Amnesty

Michael Jagamara Nelson and Imants Tillers first met at the 1986 Biennale of Sydney, across a copy of the catalogue opened at an image of *The Nine Shots*. The painting was not yet the *cause célèbre* it was soon to become, but the elements Tillers had “quoted” from Jagamara’s *Five Stories* – illustrated on the next page of the catalogue – were clearly recognisable to its creator. Jagamara’s memory of the encounter is that, in response to the question of who had done his painting “on top of my work”, Tillers “kept quiet, his head bending down”¹. Reading regret in his body language and believing that he had acted out of a desire to learn more about Aboriginal culture, Jagamara shook the outstretched hand of Tillers as a fellow famous Australian artist and told him it was “all right” this time but not to get “carried away” – advice that Tillers seems to have heeded. Not so the art historians. Over the ensuing decades, *The Nine Shots* would become familiar to every high school art student as the acme or nadir, depending on your viewpoint, of a distinctively Australian brand of post-modernism – almost a national icon whose fame eventually eclipsed that enjoyed by Jagamara’s *Five Stories* during the 1980s. Meanwhile Indigenous art was conquering the Australian art world. In his wonderful anthology *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, Ian McLean has shown how this was possible because of the perception of Indigenous art as a model for post-modernist times. And that Tillers and his supporters’ defence of his “quotations” of Aboriginal art was the source of this perception. All of which makes the emergence a quarter of a century later of the striking series of collaborative works by Jagamara and Tillers featured in

¹ Michael Jagamara Nelson, personal communication April 2012

this exhibition impossible to ignore.

It says something about the Australian art world and the nature of its Indigenous “conquest” that, despite being coupled in the minds of most of the Australian art audience, Tillers and Jagamara did not meet again for another fifteen years. Their paths might never have crossed had Tillers not been inspired by some “surprising” sculptural works that he saw illustrated in an art magazine to propose Jagamara’s inclusion in an Olympic sculpture project at Homebush Bay by way, he said, of “introducing an Indigenous element”.¹ He had not been following Jagamara’s career and up to this point was unaware of his association with the Campfire group and FireWorks Gallery in Brisbane. But he soon travelled to Brisbane and met with Jagamara on one of the latter’s regular trips since the late 1990s to produce at FireWorks more of the “action” (or “abstract”, as he calls them) paintings of his traditional Dreaming designs whose three dimensional version had attracted Tillers’ attention. When the Homebush Bay idea fell through, FireWorks’ Director Michael Eather proposed that the two artists work together on some collaborative paintings, which were all the rage at the turn of the century. Beginning tentatively and building slowly over a decade, they produced together the dozen works around which this exhibition is built.

The series culminates in *Hymn to the Night*. On scale alone, it is the “great work”. It also stands out for me because, stripped of Tillers’ contribution, it looks like a classic Jagamara painting of the kind that he used to do back in Papunya around the time he first met Tillers. (To draw this aspect of the painting out, I have created an annotated diagram of his initial layout with a legend explaining the significance of its various design elements.) Something has come full circle for him in this particular work. Tillers seems

to have felt this too. Jagamara executed the design layout after spending several hours with Tillers looking at the works and images of earlier generations of Papunya painters in my book *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*². It was their longest conversation in an acquaintance of ten years. The "empathy" Tillers said he felt with Jagamara at that point made it possible for the first time in their working relationship for him to relinquish control and leave Jagamara in command of the entire expanse of empty boards. By the time he returned to the gallery, Jagamara had produced a vision of his Dreaming country, laying out in the manner of one of the "great map" paintings by Clifford Possum that he and Tillers had just been admiring, all his the Dreaming stories and designs. That he was doing this with the subsequent contributions of his collaborator in mind is borne out by the generous spaces he left between the elements, which he joked to Eather at the time were to allow room for "all them words he puts on".²

Jagamara: Imants – he got all the names eh? Some of them are places that I know, which is really good with my work.³

Eather: Do you think people understand when they see the two artists working together? What do they think the message is?

Jagamara: Message is to teach another artist. Instead of doing painting for himself – separate, work with Aboriginal artist. White man's story, blackfella story: we just come together.

Eather: Some people do and some people don't like collaborations.

² Michael Eather, personal communication May 2012

Jagamara: I don't really mind, because I met him – Imants –long time ago in Biennale. We just come together, black and white artists, my stories and his story.

Eather: And you're happy to put your important stories on these paintings and allow his words to come?

Jagamara: I can put my design on top of his work – white man's story – and my story on top of his, which is good to collaborate. I don't mind Imants because he's a good artist and I'm a good artist – we both good artists.

Eather: Then you went in again and did the dots over the drawing. Did that change it in any way?

Jagamara: I change it – see, with the circles and names and picture here? It came out really good with whiteman story blackfella story, his work and my work and all this writing – good! I like it, collaboration.

Jagamara subsequently went through the design layout with Tillers, explaining the elements to him using my 1997 monograph, which sets out all the sites portrayed in his paintings and the stories associated with them³. He had an apt pupil. I asked Tillers over a year later in the course of researching this essay what he remembered of Jagamara's explanations. He recalled instantly that the concentric circles with root-like emanations at opposite corners of the painting represented Jagamara's regular theme of bush yams, and that the snake in the top left hand quadrant marked his birthsite, i.e., Pikilyi (Vaughan Springs), a place that he had learnt was associated with dangerous snakes. More significantly, he said that what he saw in Jagamara's design

³ Imants Tillers April 2012, Michael Eather May 2012 personal communications

layout was a landscape filled with “spirit beings”:⁴

Europeans don't understand this sacred ground and the Law that constrains our interaction with it. They are ignorant, they still don't understand. We've been trying to explain it to them, to explain what it means to us, for the sake of all Australians. We try to show them that this is our land. We try to show them our Dreamings. But white people don't even recognise our ownership of it. Today we paint all these pictures and white people want these too. They still can't understand. They want them as souvenirs to hang on their walls, but they don't realise that the paintings represent the country, all of this vast land.⁵

Speaking through an interpreter in his native Warlpiri, Jagamara had expressed his frustration with Western audiences of Aboriginal art in these eloquent terms in 1986 for the cameras of the Channel Four documentary *State of the Art* – and for the next twenty-five years repeated the same message, apparently to deaf ears. Finally, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the most influential exponent of the view that Papunya paintings were just “pretty pictures” had seen the light.⁶

Tillers' contributions to *Hymn to the Night* reflect and complement his perception of adding to Jagamara's sacred landscape. Just as Jagamara had reprised his earlier paintings of multiple Dreamings laid out like a map across the whole canvas, so Tillers referenced *The Nine Shots* in which the artists' relationship began by his addition of a Baselitz figure. However, this time it was not a figure of ruin and hopelessness spread-eagled “on top of” Jagamara's painting like a crucified hobo, but an upright figure positioned so as to be looking out across the expanse of Jagamara's

Dreaming country. Moreover, many of the place and language group names Tillers added would be recognisable to Jagamara as part of the world he depicted on the painting: locations like Papunya, Yuendumu, Jupiter Well, Haasts Bluff, Hermannsburg, Balgo, Lake Mackay, Kintore, Docker River, Ayers Rock, Wave Hill, Tanami, Lake Amadeus, and language groups like Luritja, Warlpiri, Gurindji, Kukatja, Walmatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Waramunga, Anmatyerre and Pintupi. To this Tillers has added esoteric sentiments he finds apposite from Melbourne poet John Anderson, who writes in a dream-like state after bouts of narcolepsy, including the line “Creating an epispase where the legend itself art can be freely thrown about” through the centre of the painting, and lines from a play about Latvians displaced to Australia, which for him resonate with Indigenous struggle, eg, “Surrendered our land”.⁷ The end result is far more than “an artificial blending... of the exoticism of Aboriginal culture with certain manifestations of contemporary art” – as he had once dismissed one of the earliest attempts to combine the work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists in the same space.⁸ It has a coherence born of the artists’ shared deliberation and intentionality in the work.

Tillers told me that after the extended conversations that gave rise to *Hymn to the Night*, he had felt “humbled”, “grateful” and “privileged that I’ve been put in a position where I can do this with him”⁹. He had acknowledged this in brackets in the lower right hand corner of the painting using – for once – his own words: “Letter of Gratitude”. This gratefulness is about respecting Jagamara as an artist “unusual in his willingness to try his hand at different things and extend the boundaries” – and something more. As suggested by the title *Hymn to the Night* and the word “Papunya” inscribed on the central panel, the painting can also be read as a song of praise to those old masters of

Papunya painting, whose example and works inspired both Jagamara and Tillers to become painters.¹⁰ Jagamara's trajectory was documented in my 1997 monograph, the same used in telling Tillers about his Dreaming stories:

I used to go there after work seeing them – they used to do the paintings in the camp. I just went around, and I saw Clifford Possum, and all them dead people, doing painting. Watching all them old people there. I used to tell them, 'That's good'. But in the background, I had my own Dreamtime stories in my mind. In my own heart and in my own mind. Because my father taught me during the ceremony. I thought to myself, I'll have to try this. Instead of looking at all them other artists, get stuck into it. Try myself.¹¹

The young Tillers had the same response. For him and other young conceptual artists who started out in the 1970s by rejecting painting, the Papunya painters breathed life back into what they had thought was an exhausted medium.¹² From their hands came paintings both "incredibly beautiful" and conceptually complex. To re-word slightly from McLean's final paragraph in *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*: the Papunya painters showed us what *painting* after modernism could look like. Tillers and Eather both distinctly remember Jagamara's explanation of the central roundel of *Hymn to the Night* as Papunya and the cluster of detached concentric circles to its right as "stars" – perhaps of the astronomical variety, although he has never otherwise referred to them as part of his inventory of Dreamings. He was, they both thought, also referring to those "old artists" whose example had inspired so many, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to become painters, thereby revitalising Australian art. I am reminded here of what I once wrote about Jagamara's paintings, which applies here also:

Conceived in these terms, the paintings become a kind of aesthetic common ground, where the experiences of people from vastly divergent cultures at last find a meeting place.¹³

Vivien Johnson

¹ Imants Tillers, personal communication, May 2012

² Michael Eather, personal communication, June 2012

³ Michael Jagamara Nelson, interviewed by Michael Eather at FireWorks Gallery, June 2012

⁴ Imants Tillers, personal communication, June 2012. Tillers identified “Ian McLean’s other book on Aboriginal art”, i.e., *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, as the source of this terminology.

⁵ Quoted in Sandy Nairn, *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1990, p. 221.

⁶ For example, “the Papunya painter paints instead the ‘pretty picture’ or the ‘easy story’ – a satisfactory and true enough explanation but not a deep ‘law’ story”, ‘Fear of Texture’, *Art & Text* 10, 1983; cited in Ian McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011, p. 53, where the source of this view in R.G. Kimber’s contribution to *Mr Sandman Bring Me a Dream* is also noted (p. 52).

⁷ Imants Tillers, personal communication, June 2012

⁸ Imants Tillers, ‘Perpetual Mourning’, *ZG/Art &Text*, Summer 1984; republished in *Imants Tillers: Venice Biennale 1986 Australia*, Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council Sydney and Art Gallery Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1986; cited in McLean, *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*,

p. 50.

⁹ Imants Tillers, personal communication, May 2012.

¹⁰ Recalling the title *Revolution by Night* (Local Consumption Publications, 1991) of James Bardon's account of his journey to Papunya to rescue his brother Geoffrey.

¹¹ Vivien Johnson, *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, Craftsman House, Roseville, 1997, p. 41.

¹² For example, Tim Johnson.

¹³ *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, p. 142.