

## **EXHIBITION PREMISE**

### **THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT**

If reconciliation is a pill, it must be taken as soon as possible, quickly absorbed and processed naturally. Swallow it and move on. However, it shouldn't be force fed. It can only be taken voluntarily. Only then will our immediate reactions be natural... ordinary. The etiquettes gained from this pill will then flow from a fundamental core – they should never appear as a simulated response. Australians, most particularly artists, are generally not motivated by such political correctness. In fact, they will most often buck such a trend and spit it out. If they are ever “inspected”, they might just hide the pill under their tongue.

When Aboriginal Art, as a contemporary expression, first emerged onto the world stage last century, countless numbers of non-Indigenous peoples were quite perplexed. How to fathom and deal with this new phenomenon? How to read it, how to comprehend it, how to contextualise it, and ultimately how to use it? It was then, and still is now, both beautiful and perplexing. So what, we might ask, are the rules of engagement?

### **CREATING AN EPI SPACE WHERE THE LEGEND ITSELF, ART, CAN BE FREELY THROWN ABOUT**

*The Loaded Ground* grew out of an ongoing conversation, between the studio and the gallery, between art and commerce, but essentially a dialogue between Imants Tillers and Michael Nelson Jagamara, fundamentally about what *they* might do next. Both are major artists in their own right, having practised for thirty years or more. Both are innovative, both have the capacity to cross over cultural borders and artistic/stylistic genres. Both have made a name for themselves doing exactly this. The exhibition premise for *The Loaded Ground* is quite simple. It is to gather all of their collaborative works created together between 2001 and 2012 and “book-end” them with a handful of selected individual works by both artists, bringing all these stories together in their entirety for their first time. (The curatorial combination of this show may well shift again in the future, if indeed the show is to travel to other venue – but the essential model should be re-instigated.) Complimenting this arrangement of works, we would also look to engage critical writing, with both academic and industry responses, to explore both the individual and collective practices and processes involved.

Such a conversation between artists rarely dwells on the past for too long. From their first re-union in 2001, the two artists were mostly concerned about discussing the future. First, a possible public art *sculpture* commission at Homebush Bay, which

didn't eventuate. Then the conversation simply became about painting together. In 2005 at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, all six of the collaborative works up to that point were exhibited in *SHOOSH! The History of the Campfire Group*, alongside Jagamara's 1984 *Five Dreamings* and Tillers' 1985 *The Nine Shots*. The resonance between these works has been well documented. Whilst that was an important connection, there was more to come in the years to follow. Seven works had been originally planned by the artists, and this number became the first chapter of their re-union. Chapter One culminated in the momentous work *Fatherland*, painted in 2008 and included in Jagamara's exhibition/publication *From the Studio* at FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane. Now in 2012 *The Loaded Ground* brings Chapter Two to a close, and is dominated by the pivotal work *Hymn to the Night*. What began here as elegy to the Western Desert painting movement evolved into a requiem of reconciliation with so many more "art stars" that have shone before us. With Jagamara starting and completing this work, stylistically and symbolically it is a clear break from the previous collaborations. Justifiably, Brisbane still is a half-way house for the artists to mediate such works. The (old Campfire) Studios remain an *epi space...* between (*here and there*), with Michael Nelson consistently *summoned forth from the desert*. And where Tillers has the opportunity to calmly explain such notions of a *reversible destiny*.

### **INDEED THE *STUDIO* IS AT THE HEART OF THE CONVERSATION. IT'S ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT...**

Whilst much of the discussion about any "rules of engagement" between artists has largely been academic, real exchanges happen daily in galleries and studios everywhere, unabated, as Aboriginal artists generally engage on their own level with various people on the ground. In the case of Tillers and Jagamara, there has been an ongoing and natural relationship since the pair started conversing in earnest. For well over a decade, both artists have been comfortable about the give-and-take in this relationship, how it feeds back into their own personal worlds and languages... and how they share the spoils evenly. There is a cyclical gesture of admiration at work here that defies any political correctness. This is precisely what happens post-reconciliation! Walking around the studio with the artists, the paintings for this project have been almost self-selecting, the three of us looking at new works or sifting through old books and photos, continuing the conversation, mainly about overlapping territories. Indeed, even as this project is being realised, a new work is taking place! Building on their previous "exchanges", a box of Tillers' canvas boards has been sent to Papunya destined to become a collaborative "earth work", with Jagamara contributing sifted layers of his red Australian homeland, a monochrome piece that perhaps ultimately truly defines *The Loaded Ground*.

. In realising this project, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Michael Nelson and Imants for their loyalty, friendship and positivity – both to others and to each other. We have also enjoyed the curatorial assistance of Tasha Finn; and the administrative support of FireWorks gallery staff; the generous editorial assistance of Rex Butler; and the collegial warmth of Vivien Johnson, Howard Morphy, Una Rey and Ian Mclean. Indeed, some of their literary efforts have also benefited from notions of collaboration, as ideas and texts have journeyed back and forth across time and country. Nancy Sever and the staff at the Drill Hall Gallery have been enthusiastic and wise in lending their support, and we thank them for getting this project scheduled and realised. The private lenders of the works have also given generously, helping us to underwrite the project by contributing direct sponsorship towards the project costs. I believe we all sense a special bond as we play out this remarkable conversation in public.

For me personally, whilst Tillers is perhaps a genius, Jagamara remains a legend! Michael Nelson consistently re-appears in town – and, as Woody Allen once famously said, “80% of success is actually turning up!” He continues to do this, sometimes to sit down with artists, writers, critics and buyers, often just to paint, to experiment, to get away from home for a working break. He watches and listens, he chats and explains. He expresses. His story has never really changed. As he himself once commented: “It’s only the art world [that] keeps changing its mind!”

However, the artworks Tillers and Jagamara create continue to go backwards and forwards – amidst shared backgrounds and foregrounds. Their resolution is essentially about an artists’ dialogue through private vernaculars of colour, design and texts. The works contain citations from various and precarious sources... some of them modern, some of them classical. The language is at once Aboriginal, English, Warlpiri, poetic and universal. And, as special note to younger artists and observers, these layers are not *photoshopped* – no computers have been used to aid these works. It’s all hand painted, by the hands of both the artists. There are no forms you can sign for this process. There is simply a handshake.

**Michael Eather**