



CANBERRA
SCHOOL OF ART

GROUNDWORK

Aboriginal Artists' Prints
from the
Canberra School of Art

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1946-1996

The Black Print

Technology and Innovation in Contemporary Aboriginal Printmaking

This collection of prints by Aboriginal artists produced at the Australian National University Canberra School of Art is a confirmation of the place of innovation in contemporary Aboriginal art and life. In the past two decades, the most striking instance of development in Aboriginal art has been associated with central desert painting and the adoption of the new technology of synthetic pigments on canvas. More recently, the work of Aboriginal printmakers has been steadily gaining recognition for its inherently innovative character and the diversity of its practices relatively independent of the debates on the centre stage.¹

The issues of originality and authenticity strike a particular cultural resonance with the political and economic circumstances of art in contemporary Aboriginal society. For the Aboriginal artist, the coincidence of innovation in form and content, whereby the medium is neither simply a means to an end nor the end in itself, addresses anew the character of prints as distinct from all other artistic media.

In the mainstream of (non-Aboriginal) printmaking, the currency of the debate still concerns the fetishisation of materials and processes, creating a kind of natural science of the medium, in which aesthetic pleasure can be gained in the almost microscopic examination of the subject. Innovation, virtuosity, idiosyncrasy and signature effects can be read in the material of printmaking alone.

It is the use of these materials by Aboriginal artists which emerges as one of the most significant new developments, in the larger historical span, of the art of the past decade. This aspect mirrors other developments in work by Aboriginal artists since the early seventies, with the common factors of the

influence of arts and crafts advisers, access to new technologies of communication, and to new cultural institutions and audiences.

This work arises from a different order of necessity to the print which sets out to challenge both modernist and traditional forms of representation, or the image which explores a conscious manipulation of reproductive process as its subject. For the Aboriginal artist, the text which illustrates the art, the debates which address mass media as socially constructing phenomena, the process of reproduction taken as an end/subject in itself, are all foreign tongues. The ironic devaluation of the sign, the commodification of vision, the creation of the spectator as a decultured, ahistorical subject, appears beyond the horizon of Aboriginal artists' concerns. They seem totally out of step with the self-absorption and neurotic pursuit of originality of a late modernist (or postmodern) consciousness.

Rather, the black print is a revealing aspect of a larger process of production of new cultural forms (reculturation?), and the creation of new meanings and values. Out of a new political and social necessity, the use of these new technologies of visual communication have a particular urgency. The character of printmaking as a reproduction process renders it potentially far more significant than the transformations that have occurred through access to the new technologies of painting, or craft processes such as batik. It is tempting to see this as an echo of earlier technological revolutions where a new language, or at least a new idiom, emerges out of the discovery of a new means of communication.

In contrast to the rhetoric of postmodernism, in contemporary Aboriginal art the questions of

authenticity and originality are construed in a different context. If, with every mark, the Aboriginal artist makes an assertion of identity and continuity, the question of 'originality' acquires a far more potent significance. Despite the loss of traditional media, the adoption of compatible technologies like printmaking permits another means of affirming the stature of a continuing culture. Each creative act is an assertion of both cultural and individual identity, and is thus political in essence, whether in invention or recovery of language forms.

It would be naive not to recognise that the current interest in new forms of Aboriginal art may still be motivated by the appeal of the themes of the archaic or primitive still extant in late modernism. The search for a lost innocence, for totalising forms of knowledge, or for control of the sign, or of language, all exert a fascination for the new audience created by the emergence of Aboriginal printmaking. Previously, these images were legitimised as a curious product of a culture defined as transitional - a dominating logic, assimilatory in character. Now they may be seen as new forms produced out of the facts of interaction between the cultures.

The very nature of the reproductive process of printmaking provides one such set of facts. With the new technologies of painting, a certain innocence may be presumed in relation to the nature of their new audiences, or the effects of the institutional or market destinations for their work. But in each instance of a printed image made by an Aboriginal artist there can be no doubt that the awareness of a new audience is inherent in the creative act itself. In both tribal or non-tribal contexts, the new forms generated by these processes come about as a consequence of this motivating consciousness, whether political or economic in essence.

Other writers have observed that the technologies of printmaking may be more or less compatible

('sympathetic') to traditional forms.² Lino-cutting may be seen to approximate carving, and block-and screen-printing have been related to stencils, body decoration and fabric crafts; scratching and scraping the lithographic stone seems to parallel other forms of incising traditional materials.

This evocation of 'tradition' holds as the referent for the continuing fascination of the tribal, characterised as a pre-socialised form of consciousness, or even of totemism as the key to the subconscious, carrying the promise of personal liberation. Or, evoking the release of the repressed, the Other is reconciled in the realm of the cultural, rather than within a political/economic sense of the release of the subservient or dominated subject.



Bede Tungatulum, b1952, Tiwi
Self Portrait, 'Purrikinni' (Owl Man) 1988 linocut

In the domain of connoisseurship and museum culture, a constant motivating impulse is the acquisition, and thus the conquest, of the 'unknowable' by the sophisticated modern mind: knowledge beyond language, beyond orthodox interpretation of the aesthetic object; reviving the perennial appeal of mythology, of primeval and lasting values, in contrast to the impermanence and pace of change of modern society.

Yet the value judgements inherent in such notions of tradition are transparent: the assumptions of superiority which result from a history of imposed authority, from the decoding of language and knowledge, or the many forms of cultural appropri-

ation. More commonly, this exists as a kind of cultural tourism that power and wealth renders 'natural' to the relations of coloniser and colonised, and to the (reassuring) contrast between apparently static and dynamic cultures.

Multiple evidence of cultural dynamism and individual expression are close at hand in the range of black prints produced since the late seventies. The ability to modify the conventions of invasive visual codes, to adopt a process where repetition is natural to narrative subjects, to address the issue of dispersal, and the recognition of simultaneity as the antithesis of the unique, authoritative account, is manifested with great virtuosity.



Sadie Singer, b1950 Pitjantjatjara
Bush Tucker 1987 lithograph

Self-Portrait, 'Purrikinni' Owl Man (1988) a linocut by Bede Tungutalum (Tiwi), and *Bush Tucker* (1988), a lithograph by Sadie Singer (Pitjantjatjara) are two such works.³ What strikes me as being distinctive about prints such as these is that the use of new media has resulted not simply in a translation of traditional forms to new media, but also in the genuinely innovative adoption of new conventions (naturalism) and subjects (the self-portrait and the still life).

Yet the fact that the acquisition of printmaking skills is still essentially an institutionalised experience (via art advisers, or marketing organisations, or in art schools and print workshops) reiterates the question of the degree to which the mythic appeal of a 'primitive' or 'ancient' innocence still operates in those settings. In these circumstances the role of the intermediary (the advisor, the agent, the printer) and the potential for intervention in the artist's creative processes, remain critical issues. How does the artist arrive at new subjects (the self-portrait, the still life) and with what fidelity does the technology translate the trace of the artist's hand? These are new contexts for art, and new ethical predicaments. This context also reflects the phenomenon of a postcolonialist consciousness, con-

ditioned by late primitivist modernism, through which the desires of those that make the print possible, who control the technology, become a part of the final product.

One hopes that the reception of works such as these does not fall into the same traps as beset Albert Namatjira and the Arrernte painters several generations ago. In adopting the new forms and technology of naturalistic painting in the medium of watercolour on paper, these artists were vulnerable to assumptions that these works were of a lesser order of authenticity and originality, or proof of knowledge of their land, than that associated with traditional artefacts.⁴

Now, the conditions for truly innovative and autonomous uses of image-making technology and

the assertion of intellectual and artistic authority are more promising. But we still have a lot to learn.

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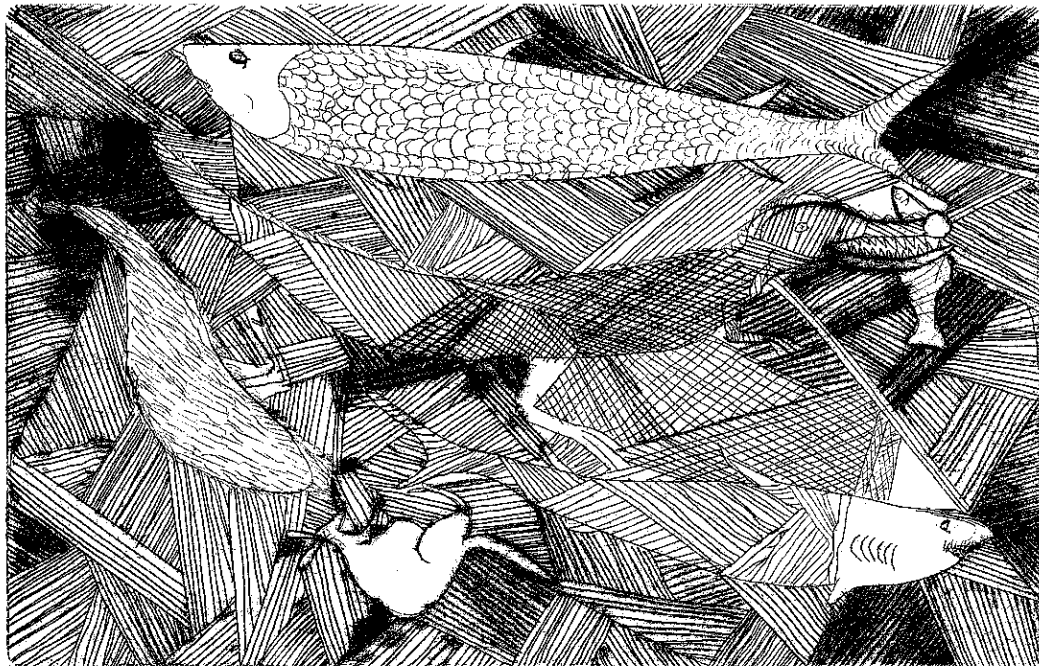
Note: An earlier version of this essay was first published under the title "Black and White: Cultures of the Print" in *Art Monthly Australia* #23 August 1989. This paper was written in response to the key survey exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia, *Prints and Australia: Pre Settlement to Present*, its Drill Hall Gallery companion exhibition *Australian Prints Now 1985-1988*, and *The Bicentennial Folio: Prints by Twenty Five Australian Artists*, all curated by Roger Butler.

¹ See Butler, Roger, 'From Dreamtime to Machine Time', *Imprint*, Vol 21, p3-4, October 1986.

² See Gilmour, Pat, 'The Potential of Aboriginal Printmaking', *The Tamarind Papers*, Vol 11, 1988.

³ As part of Theo Tremblay's continuing project with Aboriginal printmakers at the Canberra School of Art, Studio One, and in the field.

⁴ Interestingly, the vitality of that tradition is now transformed by the women of Hermannsburg in their imagery as decoration on pottery.



Albert Waradjima
Djambarrpyngu

Animals, Emu and Fish
1976 drypoint