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White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australia Art

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WHITE ABORIGINES

Identity Politics in Australian Art

White Aborigines is an investigation of how identities have been constructed in Australian art from 1788 to the present. Beginning with a discussion of the ways in which Australia was imagined by Europeans before colonisation, Ian McLean traces the representation of indigenuity—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—through the history of Australian art. In doing so, he tells the story of the invention of an Australian subjectivity. He argues that the colonising culture invested far more in indigenous aspects of the country and its inhabitants than it has been willing to admit. McLean considers artists and their work within a cultural context and also provides a contemporary theoretical and critical context for his claims. He proposes strikingly original readings of the practices of several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, concluding with a detailed discussion of the work of Gordon Bennett.

Ian McLean is a senior lecturer in art history and theory at the School of Art, University of Tasmania. He is the author of *The Art of Gordon Bennett* (with Gordon Bennett, 1996), and his articles have appeared in journals including *Third Text*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Art and Australia*, *Agenda* and the *Australian Journal of Art*.

All ruling strata claim to be the
oldest settlers, autochthonous.
Theodor Adorno
Minima Moralia, p. 155

For Sumai

WHITE ABORIGINES
Identity Politics in Australian Art

IAN McLEAN

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Preface

This book discusses how the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 'Australia' were imagined in Australian painting over the previous two hundred years. My aim is to do more than trace a particular theme in the history of Australian painting; it is to tell a story of the invention of an Australian subjectivity.

The purpose of my interpretative history is to test an argument, not provide a comprehensive account of Australian painting. My analysis of paintings and, at times, other forms of expression, is presented as evidence that, in Australia, the colonising culture invested far more in indigenous aspects of the place than they have been willing to admit. The revelations of Elizabeth Durack's and Leon Carmen's Aboriginalised alter egos are only the most recent examples of the desire by the colonising culture to be white Aborigines. This desire, sanctioned by the doctrine of *terra nullius*, forms a disturbing and even obsessive undercurrent in Australian mythologies of identity. It is an unresolved social issue and shows every sign of remaining so for a long time.

The tracking of the representation of indiginity in Australian painting involves more than investigating those paintings which include images of Aborigines – particularly since the relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines have been, and still are, primarily governed by issues of land ownership. Further, the psychology of representation and its stagings in allegory and other symbolic forms, along with an understanding of the concepts which inform Western thinking about identity, are important to my discussion. Implicit in my argument is the persistence of age-old Western meta-narratives of identity which continue to stage our politics of identity, and which are constituted as much by the constructions of forgetting as by memory.

The first three chapters discuss and place in historical context the

*He who
desires
of
Australia
often
imagined*

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ideas and ideologies which staged the initial imagining, exploration, invasion and settlement of Australia by Europeans – ideologies which galvanised around concepts of the Antipodes, utopia, melancholy and redemption. The remaining chapters, which are loosely linked in chronological order to suggest an historical narrative, trace the picturings of identities in Australian painting during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and conclude with a discussion of the contemporary urban Aboriginal artist, Gordon Bennett. Finally, I have written a postscript that directly engages with the theoretical concerns that drive my argument.

My argument owes a considerable debt to the large number of excellent and insightful studies of colonial cultures, and in particular, of Australian culture, that have been published in the last decade. However, Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific*, published nearly thirty years ago, remains the starting point of any study of Australian culture from the perspective of cultural interactions between indigenous and colonising peoples. Of the many recent studies, Robert Dixon's *The Course of Empire and Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788–1860* is a much-valued book which I often returned to for guidance. Ian Burn's and Paul Carter's writings, as different as they are from each other, have always been an inspiration, especially in their attention to the aesthetic dimensions of pictures and texts. Ross Gibson was another early inspiration, and it was probably his film, *Camera Natura*, which first set me thinking seriously about notions of Australian identity.

I have been particularly fortunate to have received the considerable input of Bernard Smith, who supervised the PhD thesis from which this book is drawn. I wish to especially thank him for the generosity of his time and ideas, and for his continued support.

I also must thank Sneja Gunew and Terry Smith who, in their reports on my thesis, provided invaluable suggestions for its working into a book; Paul Carter, Nikos Papastergiadis and Kay Schaffer, for their intelligent comments on various aspects of my argument; Gordon and Leanne Bennett for patiently and thoroughly answering my many questions during the research for chapter 8; and to the many colleagues who responded to my published essays and conferences and seminar papers – many of which were the starting points of the chapters in this book. Finally, this book would not have been as elegant without the patient editors at Cambridge University Press – Phillipa McGuinness and Jane Farago, the readings of Sue Rowley, and the excellent editorial work of Lee White.

No matter how fine one's sources and colleagues, in the end the writer must claim responsibility for what is written, especially since all histories, and especially interpretative histories such as this, are highly selective accounts. At this point, as I write the last words before returning the

edited manuscript to the publisher, I realise that I can do nothing more about the many omissions and generalisations which my overly ideological reading of paintings and texts produced, and, with some relief, leave it for others to judge me on these counts.

IAN MCLEAN

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of parts of the following chapters have been published previously: chapter 1 – Ian McLean, 'Europe's Antipodean others', *Thesis Eleven*, 48, 1997, pp. 69–90; chapter 2 – Ian McLean, 'Reclaiming Australia: the Port Jackson School and its exile', *Art and Australia*, 33, 1, Spring 1995, pp. 94–103; Ian McLean, 'Colonials kill artfully', *Perspectives on Academic Art*, ed. Paul Duro, Art Association of Australia, Canberra, 1991, pp. 56–71; chapters 3 and 4 – Ian McLean, 'Your own land is the best: the limits of redemption in Australian colonial art', *Australian Journal of Art*, XII, 1994–5, pp. 124–45.; chapter 4 – Ian McLean, 'White Aborigines', *Third Text*, 21, Spring 1993, pp. 17–26; chapter 8 – Ian McLean and Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996; Ian McLean, *Mirror Mirror: The Narcissism of Coloniality: Gordon Bennett*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra, 1996; Ian McLean, 'Psycho(d)rama mirror line: reading Gordon Bennett's installation *Mirrorama*', *Third Text*, 25, Winter 1993–4, pp. 77–80; Postscript – Ian McLean, 'Imagining "Australia": Paul Carter's migrantology', *Crossing Lines: Formations of Australian Culture*, eds C. Guerin, P. Butters and A. Nettlebeck, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Adelaide, 1996, pp. 19–25; Ian McLean, 'The metaphors of (post)colonial redemption: the writings of Paul Carter', *Third Text* (forthcoming).

In 1993 the University of Tasmania funded twelve months study leave for research at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne, as part of my PhD work on the representation of Aborigines in Australian painting. I particularly appreciated the help of Professor Margaret Manion and Dr Roger Benjamin in looking after my needs there, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, who allowed me to use the facilities of the Centre for Australian Studies.

CHAPTER 1

Ocean and the Antipodes

Like other settler colonies, Australia has a cultural ethos and national mythology which *appears* indifferent to its indigenous inhabitants, because their origins seem elsewhere and fantastic, even fabulous. However, non-Aboriginal Australian culture also brushes up against the fabulous. Living on the 'other' side of the world during a Eurocentric age, all Australians contain the trace of what ancient Aegean geographers called 'Ocean' (*Okeanos*), 'the vast "river" thought to surround the landmass formed by Europe, Africa and Asia'.¹

James Romm described Ocean as 'a vivid symbol of the gateway or barrier between inner and outer worlds'.² On the inner side, Ocean is the threshold of all that is solid and everyday; on the other outer side, it melts into the primal airy chaos (*apeiron*) of the beyond. While stories of limitless waters west of the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar) provided an actual basis for the ancient Greek idea of Ocean, its function was to conceptually secure an identity, a sense of self and place. For this reason some ancient writers, such as the much travelled and world-wise Herodotus, doubted its actual existence. However, the idea remained integral to classical geography, for it provided the symbolic means of imagining identity by making place an emblem of the self. It is, for example, evident in Ptolemy's maps, which depict the known world surrounded by ocean. If, after Plato,³ Ptolemy imagined a large land mass on the other side of Ocean, it was an emblem of the unknown, of the non-identical. Thus Ptolemy named it *terra incognita*, a theoretical land which, at least since late Roman times, has also been called the Antipodes.

According to Yuri Lotman, 'every culture' divides 'the world into "its own" internal space and "their" external space' – it is 'one of the human cultural universals'. Lotman's boundaries are for crossing, they are