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Other Side Art: Trevor Nickolls

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Abstract
In a review of Gordon Bennett’s retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007, Rex Butler claimed that there have been two revolutions in Australian art, the first at Papunya in 1971 and the second, an echo of the first, around 1990, when Bennett burst upon the scene.

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In a review of Gordon Bennett’s retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007, Rex Butler claimed that there have been two revolutions in Australian art, the first at Papunya in 1971 and the second, an echo of the first, around 1990, when Bennett burst upon the scene.

“Of course, before Bennett there existed what was called urban Aboriginal art, by artists such as Trevor Nickolls and Robert Campbell Jr, but it was Bennett who brought a conceptual rigour to these often artistically crude and expressionistic works. It’s hard to imagine the ambiguous aphorisms of Richard Bell or the media-savvy strategies of Brook Andrew without Bennett’s example.”

Bennett may well be the revolutionary who instigated a new era in Australian art, but no matter how “artistically crude” Nickolls’ paintings might seem, he cannot be footnoted as a “crude” predecessor of sophisticated postmodernist urban Aboriginal art.

The phrase “artistically crude” is, like the term “primitive”, a classic example of othering. For centuries it relegated Indigenous art to the dustbin of art history and justified a Eurocentric cosmology. This changed in the early 20th century, when artistic crudity became the weapon of choice for the avant-garde. To be otherwise was to be academic.

If Nickolls’ art is “crude”, he is no naïve. He was a precocious drawer and began formal training at the age of eight. Not many kids growing up poor in Findon (near Port Adelaide) discover Picasso so young. He completed his undergraduate studies at the South Australian School of Art in 1970 and postgraduate at the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) in 1980. He has won numerous awards, is a prolific exhibitor, is represented in all State galleries and represented Australia at the 1990 Venice Biennale.
What then would make a contemporary art historian judge Nickolls’ art as lacking sophistication? Is it because the art seems the result of a compulsive neurosis? You feel it in the obsessive draftsmanship, as if he can’t resist adding another mark, another sign. His paintings have the manic intensity and the *horror vacui* of some outsider art. This so marks his work that there appears to have been no significant conceptual development over the years, just the same relentless anxiety to cover the canvas with the imprint of a deep and constant disquiet.

There is some support for this interpretation in Nickolls’ biography. He owes his early art classes to his mother’s worry. She sent him to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed Saint Vitus’ dance. Realising that young Trevor was “using drawing to communicate,” the psychiatrist recommended it as therapy. However to think that Nickolls’ works is simply the manifestation of mental disturbance is to misread his paintings. It misses not just their content but also their aesthetic and conceptual accomplishment.

As much as Nickolls appears to depict an unchanging manic inner world, closer examination of his oeuvre reveals that within it are distinct periods that directly relate to real events and places. Whenever Nickolls moved his style and subject matter also changed. For example, in 1984, after moving from Melbourne to Sydney, his signature urban scenes of ceaseless battle between dreamtime and machinetime gave way to gentle wry landscapes in which, at this site of first invasion where Colby and Bennelong were kidnapped and the Governor speared, dreamtime persists.

Nickolls’ journeying towards a dreamtime world took another direction after meeting Rover Thomas in 1990 and travelling to Venice. Now dreamtime is not so much the antinomy of machinetime but haunts or pervades it. Nickolls’ art is a careful diaristic record of a mad world not a mad mind. He is the Breughel of our times.

Neither mad nor naïve, Nickolls was drawn to the “artistically crude” for much the same reason as early modernists: it was perceived to be pure and free from corruption, a utopia, a bridge. Nickolls’ appreciation of it began in those innocent years of childhood when he was an aficionado of comics and advertising. His early experience drawing them is evident in the graphic, iconic and didactic quality of his imagery. The screaming upturned face in *Guernica* spoke expressly to him, and he adopted it as both a self-portrait and an icon of the anguish of dreamtime in an age dominated by the ‘white spirit’ of machinetime.

Nickolls’ search for an age of innocence was evident at art school, where he became deeply interested in the so-called primitifs: “I was interested in Giotto and the time before Giotto”. Contemporary art at the time left him cold. The only modern art movement that attracted his attention was surrealism. Nickolls saw a relationship between surrealist theory and what he called “the concept of dream time”. By the time he left art school he had developed a distinctive style that combined features of surrealism, the magic realism of many Fourth World artists, and most of all, the alternative underground of the 1960s. There is, observed Ulli Beier, a
“touch of black American panache” in Nickolls’ art and pose, but at heart he was a hippy. Bob Dylan was his teenage muse.

Nickolls’ distaste for art theory can in part be explained by the misfortune of attending art school in the late 1960s and again in the late 1970s. Nickolls was the classic outsider, the kid who did not fit: “I feel that my spirit inside comes from another time, another space, that it’s quite alien to this time.”

The psychiatrist diagnosed Saint Vitus’ dance, but Nickolls had his own term: “encapsulated”. The great encapsulators were technology and consumerism, what he glossed as “white man and science and greed”.

For Nickolls art and nature are not two opposed things but driven by the same will for life (spirit) and expression. In the 1970s he realised that there was a similar symbiosis between nature and Aboriginal art. He felt a deep nostalgia for what it represented: a “dreamtime” when humans were not alienated from nature. He felt condemned to walk a tightrope between the “machinetime” of this life and “what I know instinctively, inherently, in the other lifetime, the Dreamtime.”

Despite Nickolls’ Manichean tendency to split the cosmos into a binary scheme, and his tendency to envisage machinetime as ‘white’, he didn’t divide the world into opposed races. In Garden of Eden (1982), he is the naked black man holding hands with a naked smiling white woman. There they are again in The adventures of Wanda Wandjina (2001), seated next to Rover Thomas in the FJ Holden.

Nickolls was too much of a hippy to translate his search for personal redemption into overtly political terms, even though he became politically radicalised in the early 1970s. He exhibited at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972, he was the first artist I know of to incorporate the Aboriginal flag in an artwork, and in 1978 taught in the politically radical Black Studies unit at Swinburne Institute of Technology with the likes of Gary Foley. But even in this company he felt the outsider: “It was too political. Those guys were just interested in radical politics. But ... my art is not my politics. I simply cannot make such direct, literal political statements in my painting.”

Political spiritual (1981) is another one of his dichotomous subjects. However, as this painting suggests, his real interest is not the difference between binary terms – between machinetime and dreamtime – but how they are entwined.

While Nickolls grew up knowing he was Aboriginal, his mother ‘played down her Aboriginality’ and he had little contact with an Aboriginal community. Only at art school in his early 20s did he begin to become familiar with Aboriginal culture. From an art historical perspective what he did with it put him at the forefront of his generation. This is because Nickolls’ career as an artist began at the same time as the Papunya Tula revolution.

Revolutions are the measure of their time. At first Papunya Tula was a silent and invisible revolution. But this changed in the early 1980s when it seemingly compelled certain sections of the artworld to recognise it as contemporary and not primitive art, and engage with it accordingly. Nickolls was an early convert.

“Those Papunya paintings, those dot paintings – they’re modern and yet they’re ancient ... They’re appropriate in this day and age where you have all the electrical energy around and we can look at things in a molecular way. Modern dot paintings could have been done in New York yesterday.”

The new relationship that developed between urban-based practitioners of European art and remote Aboriginal art was
called ‘appropriation’. It was particularly evident in three urban artists who each began their art careers at the same time that Papunya Tula was born: Trevor Nickolls, Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers. Nickolls stands out in this revolutionary triumvirate for several reasons. First, he preceded both Johnson and Tillers down this path. Johnson’s breakthrough moment occurred in the early 1980s when he travelled to Papunya. For Nickolls it occurred in 1979 when the Papunya Tula painter Dinny Nolan stayed in his flat for a few weeks. The impact is evident in work made after Nickolls graduated from the VCA at the end of 1980, in which he developed his characteristic style joining Western Desert dotting, Arnhem Land raark and a graphic comic book style. These works, such as Machinetime Dreamtime (1981), The death of John Lennon (1981), Dollar dreaming (1984) and Machinetime and Dreamtime (1984), introduced his signature style.

Second, there is his Aboriginal background. It is why Lin Onus, of the same generation as Nickolls, regarded him as the father of contemporary urban Aboriginal art and called him “the great innovator of the 70s” for showing how Aboriginal artists raised in a European world could meaningfully engage with Aboriginal traditions.

What was so innovative about Nickolls’ appropriation? Intersections between European and Indigenous traditions had occurred well before Nickolls. Since first contact Indigenous artists had been assimilating certain European conventions into an Aboriginal idiom to develop their own forms of modernism. In the 20th century European modernists began doing something similar, except in reverse, assimilating certain formal attributes of Aboriginal art into a European modernism. Sometimes artists from both traditions adopted the idiom of the other, developing a European Aboriginalism or an Aboriginal Europeanism — what Adrian Lawlor called in 1947, “the Black looking white-wards and ... the White ... Black-wards” Lawlor was thinking of Albert Namatjira and Margaret Preston.

Nickolls’ approach, however, was very much of its time. He built a conceptual dialogue between the two traditions, as did Johnson and Tillers. Such ‘appropriations’ seemed to many to be another type of colonialism. This is how Preston’s and Namatjira’s art was explained, even if from different sides of the fence. This is also how the art of Johnson and Tillers was interpreted. Nickolls escaped this criticism for reasons of political correctness.

However, Johnson, Tillers and Nickolls did not simply take elements of traditional Aboriginal design for their own purposes. Rather their aim was to loosen the conventional modernist/colonialist separation between Aboriginal and European traditions and its discourse of essentialism and otherness, and at the same time dissemble their own subjectivity by opening it to the play of Aboriginal art. The result in each of these artists’ work is a cross-cultural, inter-subjective and dialogical pictorial space — expressed in distinctive ways by each. It deeply affected the way each thought about the conceptualisation of pictorial space.

The abstract potential of Aboriginal design began to infiltrate Nickolls’ paintings and in the latter half of the 1980s they became more abstract and spacey. Johnson’s and Tillers’ pioneering roles in this revolutionary moment of contemporary art are well-known. They became leading artists setting the agenda of contemporary art. However Nickolls’ Aboriginality locked him in the ghetto called Aboriginal art. He discovered at one exhibition in the late 1980s that his work was unable to be purchased from the contemporary art budget of the state gallery because, he was told: “Aboriginal work has no place in contemporary displays.” It was exactly such essentialism that his appropriations contested. In the early 1980s he had complained: “I find it restricting to be labelled an Aboriginal painter.”

He later said: ‘My work is cross-cultural and, as far as I’m concerned, by classifying it and saying it is Aboriginal art, by putting it in a box — well, that, to me, is racist. We have to break down that barrier. We have to evolve Aboriginal art as part of Australian art ... There has to be a breakdown of the barrier which insists on separating the two. Why can’t my work be bought with the money from the contemporary Australian art budget?’

That was over twenty years ago. If the new wing at the National Gallery of Australia — where a Nickolls painting now hangs – is anything to go by, today the ghetto of Aboriginal art has become a palace. But ghetto or palace, the post-Aboriginal post-European world mapped by the early art of Nickolls, Johnson and Tillers, and the new mappings by a new generation of artists such as Bennett (who forbade his work to be hung in the new Aboriginal wing at the NGA), Bell and Andrew, is yet to fully reverberate in the architecture of our museums, of our country and of our minds.

4 Nickolls, op.cit, p.110.
6 ibid., p.10.
7 ibid., p.11.
9 ibid., p.104.
10 Nickolls, op.cit, p. 107.
12 ibid., p. 7.
17 Beier, op.cit, p. 28.
18 Nickolls, op.cit, p. 107.