The eternal return of irony: Gordon Bennett (1955-2014)

Ian A. McLean

University of Wollongong, imclean@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
While it is foolhardy to predict artists' legacies, Rex Butler's claim – made in an incisive review of Gordon Bennett's retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007 – would seem on safe ground as few artists had a greater impact on the Australian artworld in the early 1990s. However, Butler is an ironic critic who writes against the grain of his own thought. Conferring on Bennett a privileged place in the history of Australian art when the grand lineages of History have lost currency was an intentionally backhanded or ironic compliment.

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... it is difficult to conceive of a history of Australian art without Bennett. He belongs to the sequence of mighty names that constitute the lineage of Australian art: Margaret Preston, Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams, Ian Fairweather and Imants Tillers.

- Rex Butler

While it is foolhardy to predict artists’ legacies, Rex Butler’s claim – made in an incisive review of Gordon Bennett’s retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2007 – would seem on safe ground as few artists had a greater impact on the Australian artworld in the early 1990s. However, Butler is an ironic critic who writes against the grain of his own thought. Conferring on Bennett a privileged place in the history of Australian art when the grand lineages of History have lost currency was an intentionally backhanded or ironic compliment.

Less backhanded is Butler’s claim that Bennett is the last Australian artist, the one who brought the idea of Australian art and thus its History to an end. He did this through what Butler called the ‘conceptual rigour’ of his work (Bennett called his practice ‘conceptual painting’). By unhinging the notion of a fixed Aboriginal identity, Bennett also unhinged that of national identity, as ‘it was white people’s relationship to Aborigines that allowed them to think of themselves as Australian.’ He is not just the first urban Aboriginal artist to conquer the Australian artworld, in conquering it he destroyed the very idea of Australian art – which is the idea of white Australia. ‘Of course,’ said Butler, ‘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.’

Butler thus suggests that in announcing their Aboriginality these earlier artists stayed within the prescribed paradigm that substantiates Australian art through its othering of Aboriginal art. Bennett, on the other hand, brought the idea of Australian art to an end by undoing the idea of Aboriginal art – an idea that is a construct of colonial discourse. The ideas of Aboriginal and Australian art are both locked into the same unholy equation – each is thought through its relationship with the other. Thus the irony of Butler’s claim that the Papunya Tula art cooperative in 1971 was the first revolution within living memory in Australian art, and Bennett’s the second; the second being simultaneously the ‘original’s echo, its continuation, perhaps even its negation.’ There is no ‘perhaps’: Bennett put the idea of Aboriginal art under erasure as surely as he did the idea of Australian art.

The other echo in Butler’s proposal that Bennett is the second revolution is Marx’s famous ironic quip ‘that all great world-historic facts and personages appear … twice … the first time as

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tragedy, the second time as farce.  

This echo is surely intended as Butler claims that Bennett’s last decade of work (post-Notes to Basquiat, [after 2002]) resorted ‘to an easy irony’ – a ‘cynical postmodernism’ – as if he ‘may be running out of inspiration.’

However, farce does have its lessons and perhaps speaks more truthfully to our age. Its easy irony is not to be sneezed at. Bennett, that profoundly unAboriginal artist who like Shakespeare leavened the tragic with the comic, was always alerting his audience to the mindfuck of discourse, its baroque maze and infinite language games. This is especially evident in the many rarely-seen drawings he did, in which the quick charge of his thought deftly moving between image and text in sharp ironic bursts lights up the page like fireworks exploding in the night. This charge particularly fuels Bennett’s most manic phase, the Notes to Basquiat series. After this, during his last decade, in his stripe paintings, reworkings of the Preston Home Décor appropriations and the Abstraction series (which rework his Notes to Basquiat), he increasingly strips back this excess to the oblique essence of his original idea: the tragic farce of language, its house of cards inside which there is nothing (and everything). Thus if Bennett is an artist who seemingly made many stylistic moves in his 25-year career, there is an underling constancy to his vision as if each phase is an eternal return rather than the chasing of fashion. His success, in this respect, is evident in his recent work being hung in Documenta 13 (2012) in Kassel and earlier work in the 8th Berlin Biennale (2014).

Because truth is always mediated by language, Bennett could only get at truth in an ironical mode. For him irony was not a smart way to evade commitment and the search for truth, but the only way of sneaking up on truth past the persistence of language. Irony was not so much an instrumental means of making satire but a methodology for arriving at the truth of truth. In Bennett’s paintings there lives what Friedrich Schlegel called ‘a real transcendental buffoonery’; they ‘breathe throughout, in their entirety and in every detail, the divine breath of irony.’  

For all his shifting styles, there is no mistaking the divine breath of a Bennett. In this respect he never changed. He stayed true to his original idea. His stylistic shifts were a moving target, a doubling or sleight of hand, which (ironically) camouflaged how little he actually moved outside the circle of irony.

Bennett burst upon the scene seemingly fully formed. From the beginning he appeared to know exactly where he was going. This is not to say that he always knew how he was going to get there, but that his work had a conviction of purpose that is rare in contemporary art. His early work, made in the half-dozen years after he graduated from the Queensland College of Art at the end of 1988, stole the show, as this was a time at the fag-end of postmodernism, when any certainty had melted away. Then Bennett seemed the only artist who not only knew where he was going but also where we were going.

This first phase is appropriately called classic Bennett. He is one of those rare individuals whose artistic legacy was set early in his career, even before he graduated. Everything he ever said is already there in The persistence of language (1987), painted in his second year of art school. And there was nothing mysterious in this: people saw it immediately: a near sell-out graduating exhibition, dealers and curators snapped him up immediately. Barely out of art school, his painting The Nine Ricochets (Fall down black fella, jump up white fella) (1990) was reproduced in the Third Edition of Bernard Smith’s classic history, Australian Painting (1991). It was the most recent painting included in the book. Bennett finished the painting as Terry Smith put the last

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3 Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Selected Aphorisms from the Lyceum,’ in Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms (German 1797), Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (trans.) (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1968), aphorism 42.
touches to his chapters that updated the book. Bernard commented to me on the audacity of Terry wanting to give so recent a painting by an unproven artist such visibility in this seminal text. But of course Bernard admired Terry’s audacity, and made no attempt to interfere in Terry’s choice. The placement of the reproduction was also telling. As a double end piece, on the last page of the text and reproduced again on the back cover, it served as a sort of mirror, providing a reverse perspective on Bernard’s history – the seminal Art History of white Australia. In this, as Butler intimates, Bennett’s painting serves as an emblem of the revisionist history that Terry wrote in the final chapters, which ironically put into question many of the assumptions about Australian art driving Bernard’s earlier text. Here, we might say (after Butler), that Bennett was not the last Australian artist but the first unAustralian artist, the artist who provided the mirror in which Butler could conceive his history of unAustralian art. If Australian artists since about 1970 had ignored the idea of Australian art, letting it gather dust, Bennett instead put it under erasure, and in doing so returned to the idea of Australian art by a different and one could say unAustralian route.

Bennett received immediate artworld acclaim because he articulated what the artworld wanted to say but didn’t know how. The irony is that the artworld knew that only an Aborigine could articulate this at this time even if it, the artworld, thought it knew what had to be said. The greater irony is that Bennett disavowed the Aboriginality of his work and the idea that only an Aborigine could say such things. He unzipped the discourses of Aboriginal and Australian identity politics by tracing their origins in the history of colonialism. This is why Bennett claimed to be a ‘history painter.’ History is what classic Bennetts are about, his aim being, to quote from a text by Juan Davila that he would have read, to reawaken ‘what Westerners have forgotten – two hundred years of colonisation.’ `There is no future without a past’, Bennett wrote in one of his drawings. However, it was always a case of using history against History. Like Edward Said and other postcolonial critics, Bennett was a Foucauldian historian: he examined the relationship between discourse (knowledge and language) and power, thus focusing on the epistemological basis of historical shifts, and in particular the epistemological assumptions and language of racism. This is where he gathered the ammunition for his ironic salvos against the Art History of white Australia.

Classic Bennetts investigate the idea that Australian art can only be understood within the context of colonial discourses and thus a global network called the British Empire. In thus eschewing the established discourse of modernism and its Western-centric baggage that concealed the history of colonialism in the discourses of modernity and modernism, Bennett situated his art of unconcealment at the forefront of current postcolonial thinking. In this respect he had more in common with the international postcolonial scene than the Aboriginal art movement in Australia as represented, for example, by the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative. Established in Sydney in 1987, it promoted Aboriginal art within a discourse of Aboriginal identity politics that eschewed the transcultural trajectory of postcolonialism for an alternative pan-Aboriginal nationalism. Bennett, however, chose cosmopolitanism over Aboriginality.

Bennett’s insights derive from applying what he learnt in art history/theory at art school to his life experience. He was an attentive art history student (his essays earned high distinctions) who soaked up cultural studies theory and its emerging postcolonial trajectory then being taught in art schools, much to the chagrin of established art critics. The most remarkable aspect of this is that he found this esoteric artworld theory relevant to his life as a mixed-up working class descendent of Aboriginal/British heritage. He is amongst the first generation of art students who learnt the lessons of postcolonial criticism, which across several disciplines attacked modernism’s Westernism. The most prominent of these artworld critics was Rasheed Araeen. Based in London, he launched Third Text in 1987, galvanizing an increasingly vocal group of black British artists –

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immigrants from Britain’s former colonies – in their attempts to penetrate the artworld. In 1994 *Third Text* published one of the first substantial essays on Bennett’s work – an essay written by Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi, cultural studies theorists not art critics.  

Hence it should not be surprising that Bennett was invited to present at the legendary conference *A New Internationalism*. Devised and managed by the London-based South African artist Gavin Jantjes for the newly established Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA) in April 1994, and hosted by the Tate Gallery, it sought to capitalise on the postcolonial turn that until now the artworld had poorly managed. The essay on Bennett’s art in *Third Text* was timed to coincide with this conference.  

Araeen, a key speaker at the conference, questioned the name ‘New Internationalism’ given the ‘Eurocentricity’ of the ‘prevailing internationalism.’ ‘The meaning of what one intends,’ he said, ‘is coded in the language’—something that Bennett would have immediately understood. The problem, said Araeen, begins ‘with the way national cultures within the West are conceived,’ by which he meant the conflation of indigenousness and national identity. He was thinking of British art, where this conflation is direct and positive:

> The notion of the mainstream as representatives of indigenous [British] values, continually reconstructed by indigenous artists, had not changed; and this indigenousness remains trapped within the notion of western culture as racially homogenous … different roles are provided for different artists based on racial or cultural differences.

Bennett, however, had to deal with an identity discourse in which the conflation between indigenousness and national identity was established through negation. In his talk, titled ‘The Non-Sovereign Self (Diaspora Identities),’ Bennett rejected ‘the grounds of any ethnic essentialism’ – what he called the ‘trap’ of ‘Aboriginality’ – and the polarization of ‘identity into black and white opposites.’ He also complained of the racism in which his art was received, a reception that completely missed the irony of his discourse. This racism is one of the main reasons why he didn’t want to be identified as an Aboriginal artist. Such identity discourse, he believed, not only prejudged its meaning it also closed down critical discourse. Bennett rejected the idea that only indigenes could speak about the histories and epistemologies that othered Indigenous people. In fact, he couldn’t understand why everyone wasn’t speaking about these things, as they have framed everyone’s lives.  

Postcolonial critics deconstruct the epistemological assumptions of colonial discourse. In an obvious sense Bennett’s art does the same, as he performs the essential deconstructive manoeuvre of unconcealment. In his studio he had a library of colonial images that he used as raw material with which to fashion his deconstructions. For a similar reason Bennett refused to speak about his work, and rarely wrote on it after the early years. Whereas the artwork is inherently ambivalent and open to interpretation – this is why the critic’s job is never done – the artist’s word easily becomes a straightjacket, taken as a truth (from the horse’s mouth) that restricts the work’s intention to the artist’s supposed intention. This is also why Bennett was an appropriation artist from beginning to end, only rivaled but not surpassed by Imants Tillers. Each artist appropriates for different reasons and does very different things with it, but both use appropriation as a means to subject the authorial voice to the voices of other and vise versa i.e. speak relationally or in

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6. Ibid., 3.
7. Ibid., 6.
conversation. In this way he, in typical postmodernist fashion, challenges the hegemony of the modernist subject, the authorial voice or transcendental ‘I’ that transforms all others into objects. Bennett used appropriation as a means to distance himself from the idea of art as an expression of the ego, and to open a space of multiple voices. He also did it to draw attention away from the burden of representation he bore as a named Aborigine, and to instead focus attention on the discourses that manufactured this identity as well as the ironic mode in which his critique was expressed. In this respect his appropriation was a strategy to disclaim identity and trouble its assumptions. For example, in Untitled (Nuance) (1992) – a sequential, gridded series of black and white photographic self-portraits[7] which gestures to Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks and also Paul Taylor and Imants Tillers’ notion of ‘white aborigines’ – Bennett peels what at first seems a transparent mask from his black face but which, with each frame gradually transforms into a white mask, crucially halting before disclosing the actual face underneath.

In Untitled (Nuance) the double (black skin/white mask) is kept in play and not resolved. This is why Bennett’s work remains ironic: he refuses to resolve difference, to come to a conclusion. Take the most reproduced of the classic Bennets, The Nine Ricochets (Fall down black fella, jump up white fella) (1990) – the painting that more than any other from this time put him on the map. It would seem, by its title, to be a direct critique of Tillers’s most reproduced painting, The Nine Shots (1985), as if Bennett means to draw a moral equivalence between ‘the appropriation of Aboriginal culture by white artists such as Tillers and ‘the slaughter of Aborigines by the previous generation of white settlers.’[10] Indeed, it is difficult not to believe that Bennett took his ideas directly from a text that does exactly this and which he likely read in his art history class: Davila’s well known criticism of three artists in the 1986 Sydney Biennale whose work had in different ways addressed Aboriginal issues: Tillers, Tim Johnson and the Aboriginal artist James Simon. The only painting that Davila names in his review is The Nine Shots, which had come under severe criticism for its appropriation of Michael Nelson Jagamara’s Possum Dreaming (1985) – now known as Five Stories.

Davila singled out Tillers for (among other things) stripping Aboriginal art bare of ‘any social or political connotations,’ of de-historicizing the art. On the face of it The Nine Ricochets remedies Tillers’ failure by not just inserting an image of a massacre but also making it the dominant image of his painting, thus de-sublimating what, according to Davila, Tillers sublimates. Davila also accused Tillers[8] of in colonialist fashion, using (appropriating) Aborigines to further his own career. Thus the subtitle of The Nine Ricochets, Fall down black fella, jump up white fella, is easily decoded as the mantra of the colonial project revivified in Tillers’s contemporary appropriation art: Fall down Jagamara, jump up Tillers.

Assuming that Bennett did appropriate Davila’s well-known criticism, did he mean to emulate Davila in a moral accusation against Tillers, or did he steal Davila’s text in order to neutralize those who would want to explain his critique in terms of his Aboriginality – his authenticity? Was he also, as is usual with postmodern and postcolonial appropriation, putting Davila’s text under erasure?

There are some obvious points in Davila’s text that would have troubled Bennett. Davila attacks the three Biennale artists for believing that rapprochement between Aboriginal and Western systems is possible, whereas Bennett is, like the other three artists, also primarily interested in what happens between these systems. Indeed his subtitle, which at one level seemingly follows Davila’s criticism, on another counters it. The phrase Fall down black fella, jump up white fella is appropriated from a Tommy McRae drawing of William Buckley, the

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escaped convict who lived happily for 32 years fully integrated in the Wathaurung clan system southwest of Melbourne. In this case the Wathaurung recognized Buckley as the returning spirit of a recently deceased relative. Thus he was a living example of the rapprochement that Davila criticized. As the jumped up white fella Buckley was also the fallen down black fella, as indeed was Bennett.

Thus the subtitle is neither a criticism nor endorsement of Davila’s review but both. In this way Bennett sublimated his own feelings – which could be strongly felt – into an elaborated critique. If I were a psychoanalyst I would diagnose Bennett’s elaborated critique, his constant appropriation and studied approach (his studio resembled a research facility as much as a traditional studio) as a kind of therapy or anger management that had the added virtue of distilling strong feelings into productive critique – but a critique that never fully arrives. In its constant delay it opens a performative space in which the viewer completes (or fails to complete) the hermeneutic circle that Bennett has unwound. I have elsewhere analysed in detail the baroque hermeneutics of The Nine Ricochets – and will only repeat my conclusion that the end effect of this hermeneutics is to draw The Nine Shots into Bennett’s circle of critique, reminding us that ‘The Nine Shots began life as a ricochet, an echo, and that this is also its future.’

Classic Bennetts, such as The Nine Ricochets, were the fruit of his art school engagement with the interstices between Western and Aboriginal art. Three contemporary artists who interrogated this particular postcolonial interstice and who stood out for Bennett at this time were Tim Johnson, Imants Tillers and Juan Davila. In many respects Davila’s appropriation of art historical and colonial images that he put into critical dialogue – such as Sentimental History of Australian Art (1983) – served as a model for Bennett, except that Bennett eschewed Davila’s expressionism and surrealist play with ego. Of the three, Johnson is the only artist that Bennett collected. He owned three works, the most important being Jizo and Amida in America (1990). The Bennetts’ eclectic collection also included a large Jon Cattapan dot painting, Psychasthenia 101 (fracture state II) (2005), a reminder that Bennett’s interest in dots – as in the Lichtenstein’s dot screen – was not to evoke Aboriginality in any straightforward sense, but instead, like Johnson’s dots, was meant as a cosmopolitan thread that connects Papunya Tula painting to the art of the world or humanity. Bennett identified as a classic cosmopolitan humanist, a global citizen. A similar point can be made about the drip. Interestingly, while Bennett did not own a work by Tillers, he did own three by Jagamara, but not classic Jagamaras of the type that Tillers had appropriated, rather Jagamara’s appropriations of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, the most impressive being a large yellow and purple Yam painting from 1998. Tillers, as it happens, also owns examples of these later Jagamaras, and all three artists appropriated Pollock’s drip painting.

Johnson’s appropriations never troubled Bennett. Whereas he agreed with Davila’s skepticism towards Tillers’s appropriations of Aboriginal art, he disagreed with Davila’s criticism that Johnson’s aspiration to belong to ‘Aboriginal and Oriental’ cultures was a false ‘attempt at redemption’ through ‘an affinity with the primitive mind.’ What he liked about Johnson is that he sat down with Aboriginal artists and conversed with them. Yet of the three, Tillers had the most impact on Bennett, both as someone to go up against, and also in his adoption of Tillers’ studied and sustained appropriation as a working methodology. Unlike Johnson and like Tillers, Bennett did not sit down with Aboriginal artists or any of the artists he appropriated, but worked with art as if it was an autonomous discourse, a subject, with which he could converse. Both were supremely

12 Davila, ‘Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game?’, 54.
unexpressionist artists, aficionados of pure irony. Their paintings do not, like Davila’s, deploy irony as satire.

Bennett’s classical phase was over by 1996. In the second half of the 1990s he investigated the nexus between Aboriginalism – the mid-twentieth-century Australian modernist movement that recognized the central place of Aboriginal art – popular culture, and Western modernism. In many respects it was a way of dealing with the pre-history of artists like Tilers and Johnson. Bennett soon shifted gear again, most likely, I think, because he tired of being typecast as an Aboriginal artist. This second shift occurred during the ascendency of Pauline Hanson and John Howard, a time that repulsed Bennett to the point of wanting, he once told me half-jokingly, to leave the country. The optimism of the Keating years had fueled Bennett’s classic phase, but the denial of Australia’s colonial history that overtook public discourse at the turn of the twenty-first century made Bennett feel that his efforts had been ineffectual and the cause hopeless. In a sense the Notes to Basquiat series, begun in 1998, was a means of escaping from the identity politics in which he had been typecast and the disillusion of the Howard years.

The Notes to Basquiat series did not abandon Bennett’s earlier concerns with colonial discourse but more assertively brought to the fore the globalism that had been inherent in his earlier work. For reasons that are too complex to address here, the series morphed into his 9/11 work, a period in which Howard’s xenophobic politics gained a global face in the policies of Bush, and the War on Terror became the new colonialism, the clash of civilizations revisited. In Notes to Basquiat (Death of Irony) (2002), Bin Laden channels Captain Cook, directing the planes into the New York skyline. Cook’s pink face and uniform combine as an emblem of the dream of late-eighteenth-century Enlightenment that produced the nightmares of racism, nationalism and clash of civilizations. The painting’s subtitle, ‘death of irony,’ refers to one of the first utterances to catch the mood of 9/11: that 9/11 marked the death of irony or the death of the postmodern play of differences and the discursive nature of reality that had characterized postcolonial critique, and a return to the hard discourse of Enlightenment. It is not for nothing that Adorno, that great critic of the Enlightenment, considered irony the enemy of totalitarianism and ‘the scorn of the leaders of the Third Reich.’ Irony disappears, said Adorno, when ‘the difference between ideology and truth, has vanished.’

Helen – if you are wanting to illustrate, as well as works mentioned above you could also use Notes to Basquiat: In the future art will not be boring, which I think is relevant to the points I make. Leanne Bennett has read the essay and knows about the article and she will facilitate any illustrations you need.


Lingard, Bob, and Fazal Rizvi (1994), '(Re)membering, (Dis)membering the art of Gordon Bennett', *Third Text*, 26 (Spring), 75-89.