The modernity of tradition: interpreting acrylic desert paintings

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For about twenty years the modernity of Indigenous acrylic desert painting has been proclaimed far and wide. While a few commentators have unproblematically assimilated the traditional and the modern into either a universalising formalism or New-Ageism, [1] the general consensus is that there can be no easy assimilation. Rather, the modernity of contemporary Aboriginal art came at a price. Nearly 15 years ago Eric Michaels emphatically spelt out what this price was:

Only if Western Desert painting – and perhaps all contemporary canvases labelled Aboriginal - are separated, wrenched, from their ethnographic context … do I believe it can achieve the legitimacy it is due in the postmodern debate no less than the contemporary market.'[2]

Rejecting what he called 'the dangerous fantasy of authenticity', Michaels argued that acrylic desert paintings 'are to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them – practices that promote issues of authority not authenticity.' We should, he said, understand Aboriginality in terms of its 'historical (not pre-historical) construction'.[3]

Such pronouncements, which negate the traditional and the authentic in favour of the modern and the aesthetic, are typical of twentieth criticism, and especially the postmodern criticism Michaels practiced. Michaels repeats a basic tenet of modernist thought that idealises history's temporality by insisting on the incommensurability of its spatial effects. Thus the modern defines itself against an image of the past. Such historicism is a meta-narrative in the most influential thought on late twentieth century criticism – in, for example, Foucault's notion of epistemic discontinuity, and the technological determinism of Benjamin and McLuhan. In Benjamin's words, the shift from the 'cult value' to the 'exhibition value' of an object results in a 'qualitative transformation of its nature'?[4]

The historicism of contemporary criticism means that from whatever side acrylic desert painting is viewed, Benjamin's words seems more than reasonable. Either the paintings are traditional and not modern, or modern and not traditional, but not, if we are still condemned to use these terms, both modern and traditional. To many non-Aboriginal eyes, the modernity of acrylic desert painting is difficult to appreciate because its aura of a primitivist authenticity is such an essential component of their interest. On the other hand, we might expect Indigenous people and anthropologists like Michaels to have the opposite problem of appreciating the authenticity of the acrylic paintings. There is little of traditional ceremony to recognise here; only rectangular acrylic images symmetrically arranged on sanitised square white walls. There is no smell and song of place, no smoke and dust, no spirit, no Country. The paintings are only vestiges distilled from complex religious ceremonies that seem superfluous in the abstract aesthetic timeless space of the gallery. No wonder these highly syncretic objects, painted entirely from readymade materials without any direct connection to Country sell well on the global market. Even the abstract patterns of their designs and the glow of their colours look digital. McLuhan would surely have little difficulty in recognising them as artefacts of the electronic age.

Benjamin's point still holds when the painters of these modern canvases are steeped in tradition, true believers who draw on their deeply held spiritual beliefs for inspiration. The reception of the work, effectively its medium of circulation, over-determines its meaning. Even Michaels, well versed in Warlpiri iconography, admits that he does not '"understand"

these paintings … in terms of the meanings the painters put there.'[5] This lack of understanding is not just due to the ignorance of viewers, but because the practitioners themselves are willing agents of modernity. They deliberately withhold, obscure or censor the traditional content of the work to make it more appropriate for the public or museum context of its exhibition. This argument has the advantage of empowering the Indigenous artist and staying true to the critical truisms of our time. It also confirms our experience of the paintings. Whether we are drawn to the vague spirituality of Aboriginal art or to the aesthetic power of its abstractions, the allure of an authentic secret withheld from view remains central to the work's presence.

The originality of contemporary Australian art criticism has been to emphasise the agency of Indigenous artists in the processes of modernisation. While acknowledging the social injustice and suffering in the communities, the modernisation of central desert art has been considered a discourse of liberation not ethnocide. A good example is Terry Smith's discussion of Emily Kngwarreye. He could have been referring to any number of Indigenous desert painters when he asked:

How did an elderly woman living all her life in the terrible postcolonial camps of the Australian desert, deeply immersed in traditional ceremonial practices of Country, with little knowledge and even less interest in Eurocentric modernist art, become 'an outstanding abstract painter, certainly among the best Australian artist, arguably the best of her time?'

According to Smith, Kngwarreye's life experiences gave her a profound understanding of modernity and a mastery of modernism. Firstly, she lived all her long life at the cutting edge of global modernity – the 'terrible postcolonial camps'. Secondly, she had an intimate knowledge of the type of decorative practices that, throughout her life, have been the main inspiration of the most innovative European abstract art.

If Smith thus points to historical connections between traditional and modernist practices, he avoids enumerating them. A popular way of doing this is through the politics of Land Rights. The rationality of white law concerning land tenure demanded tokens of Indigenous authenticity in exchange for land rights, thus stimulating Indigenous art production. Besides suggesting that the Aboriginal art movement is the creation of white law, this idea too neatly draws the traditional and the modern together – too neatly because it elides the real issue at stake, and thus underestimates the achievement of the desert acrylic painters. In fact white law did not demand the production of abstract acrylic paintings. It demanded something seemingly quite different: expressions of authentic traditional practices, not the withholding of them. The real pretext of acrylic desert painting is not Land Rights but Country, not land ownership but the Dreaming; and it is in this respect that acrylic desert paintings are ultimately judged by its artists and their community.

Now critics also acknowledge the abiding importance of the Dreaming and Country in the production of acrylic desert paintings – as they must if they claim the desert painters use aesthetic devices to protect or shield form view their ancient customs. Contrary to liberal humanist ideals, censorship is here enabling, even essential, for the success of desert acrylic painting. Usually such censorship is considered in political terms, as a means of protecting tradition, of keeping it safe from modernity. However, while some non-Aboriginal viewers might consider these new aestheticised acrylic paintings mere shadows of their ceremonial origins, there is ample evidence that for traditional Aboriginal viewers the

withholding in no way diminishes the spiritual efficacy and authenticity of the paintings. If anything it is increased. In keeping a secret secret, the secret is doubled; it attains a magical power. The aestheticisation of the art might modernise it,[6] but it also further entrenches its traditional auratic power. This is because something withheld is not obliterated but, as Freud pointed out, is reified, its power multiplied. The modernisation of Aboriginal art actually enhances its authenticity and traditional power.

What Smith says about the modernity of Kngwarreye and the modernism of her art is true enough. However it is only half the story and it skirts what is supposedly withheld in her work. Much like Michaels, Smith acknowledges the continuing importance of traditional values in the production of Indigenous art, but isolates these values from his main interest in the art's postcolonial relations of production. For example, while he admits the role of traditional values in the revival of art practices since the 1960s, not considered is the possibility that these traditional values might already and always have been modern – that the so-called pre-historical is historical. Maybe traditional ceremonies are not, as Smith implies, hangovers from the past that 'persist, quite separately from any contact',[7] but have always been deeply historical rituals alive to the place and time of their performance. In short, such analysis, and the critical tradition from which it descends, remains trapped within a particular historicist logic of European modernism that defines the modern against the traditional.

Interestingly, in the 1970s museum curators and the desert community elders alike criticised the untraditional format of the new acrylic paintings. At face value the curators and elders might seem allied in a conservative argument against modernisation and for authenticity, as if each group believed these new paintings were fakes. And so they seemed. In traditional ceremonies, the sites, bodies and even pigments of the designs have a direct and authentic relationship to Country. On the other hand, in acrylic desert paintings colour is no longer an integral part of place, but reduced to an aesthetic relationship. With immaculate McLuhanesque and Benjaminesque logic, Michaels claimed that 'except for a caligrammatic residue, every essential feature of this ritual work is altered utterly in the shift to a portable, marketable object.'[8]

However this was not the elder's complaint. They did not feel that the ceremonial power of the designs had been compromised. Far from being fakes, it was exactly the powerful consequence of these new designs that worried them. The elders feared their very authenticity, and the detrimental effects it might have on Country. The problem, said Vivien Johnson, was not the new medium as such, but its colonising tendencies. The traditional way of inflecting Dreamings in particular sites was threatened. In Johnson's words: 'When the Dreamings pass through another tribe's land, custodianship passes into other hands. By proclaiming only the Papunya painters' rights to the Dreamings, their paintings had inadvertently torn the fabric of Western Desert society.'[9]

According to Johnson, the only solution was for the Papunya painters to desist or for all communities to join them, creating a type of internet of mutual exchange. In deciding to join them, ceremony was modernised, or in contemporary parlance, it was a decision for reconciliation and globalisation. However it was also a decision for Country and tradition. The mythical journeys of the ancestors are now more openly hooked into the wider multi-tribal network of the new ceremonies being performed across the central desert, and through acrylic media, in other parts of Australia and around the globe. However this is not

something new for the ancestors; they had always travelled widely. They are the precursors of the inveterate postmodern global tourist in their perennial pilgrimages from important site to important site.

Despite his McLuhanesque rhetoric, Michaels recognised a shared sensibility in the reception of the acrylic desert painters. If he, a trained anthropologist, did not fully understand their stories, neither do those who are 'initiated and competent in the stories and ceremonies'. Even for them, said Michaels, 'some meanings would remain inaccessible'. It is the stories themselves that are secretive. Michaels pointed out that the deferral of meaning is built into the very structure of Aboriginal ceremony, embedded in its very performative nature. The meaning is not in the object itself or the signs it displays, but says Michaels, 'in a participatory ritual where there is no proscenium, and no passive, distanced observer.'[10] This is equally true of acrylic desert paintings, and I believe an essential feature of their contemporary appeal in our post-conceptual age, and the quite reasonable comparison often drawn between them and the large canvasses of American abstract expressionism. Even when passively viewed in the antiseptic whiteness of the art museum, those who experience the aesthetic power of desert acrylic paintings intuitively feel their performative nature. In this respect authentic Warlpiri ceremony and its aestheticised version of desert acrylic painting share an interactive format. Meaning is not given or even read. While the designs include signs of the Dreaming, and so can be read or interpreted, they are only signs. As signs, they act more like camouflage than windows. However their real role is as pretext rather than text; they inaugurate a space of interaction not interpretation. The real meaning of acrylic desert paintings is, despite the title of this paper, that they can not be interpreted, or what can be interpreted is not the meaning of the painting. The meaning is not in the painting, but in our intuitive play with it. It is what Croce would associate with aesthetic knowledge, though today we are probably more likely to ally it with the indeterminate logic of post-conceptual art, or less grandly, with the thrill kids get from computer games.

The withholding of meaning in desert acrylic painting is not, as is sometimes claimed, a special feature of contemporary Indigenous art designed to protect Aboriginality from modernity. Rather, it has always been a feature of Aboriginal art. The Dreaming is ultimately a powerful mystery or secret; it is not the Dreaming that needs protecting from us, be we Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Rather it is we who must be protected from it.

Today national identities are being squeezed between traditional local and postmodern global tendencies. The unexpected resurgence of local identities and practices might be explained as the resistance of anachronistic regional forces to global capitalism. However, for Michaels, Marshall McLuhan's suggestion that it was a predictable effect of the electronic age tallied with his own experiences at Yuendumu. Hence his insight that the localised acrylic desert painting and television programs he saw being made there were postmodern forms. The challenge is to also recognise the postmodernity of all Indigenous cultural practices. Then, to extend a comment by Howard Morphy, contemporary world art would be 'one stage in the history of Aboriginal art.'[11]

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[1] For example, Noel Sheridan, then director of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, made the following comment in 1990: 'Those kinds of modernist, existentialist explorations that moved from a materialist base to abstraction in search of truer articulations are somehow confirmed by the powerful knowledge resources that Emily Kngwarreye and others in her community seem to effortlessly draw upon, across thousands of years allowing us to glimpse and see for ourselves what is radical in great art.' (Quoted in Jennifer Issacs, 'Ammatyerre Artist', Emily Kngwarreye Paintings, Jennifer Issacs, Terry Smith et al., Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p. 20.)

[2] Eric Michaels, 'Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics', *Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, ed. Sue Cramer, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989,, p. 32.

[3] Eric Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal Art', *Bad Aboriginal Art Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, Michaels, p. 162.

[4] Walter Benjamin, 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, translated Harry Zohn, Fontana,1982, Bungay, p. 227.

[5] Michaels, 'Western Sand Painting and Postmodernism', *Bad Aboriginal Art,* p. 51.

[6] For an illuminating discussion of the secret in post-object art – in particular in Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* 1967-68, see Rex Buter, 'What is the secret of Secret Painting?: On Looking at Seeing and Reading', *Art Journal of Australia*, XIV, 2, 1999, pp. 27-40. Butler discusses.

[7] Terry Smith, in Bernard Smith with Terry Smith (1962), *Australian Painting*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 496.

[8] Michaels, 'Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics', p. 28.

[9] Vivien Johnson, 'Especially Good Aboriginal Art', *Third Text*, 56, Autumn 2001, p. 44.

[10] Michaels, 'Western Desert Sandpainting and Postmodernism', p. 51.

[11] Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon, London, 1998, p. 420.