

Winter Walkabout

At once cosmopolitan and geographically insular, Australian culture is still trying to define itself. Here, an American painter tells of his visit to the country's urban and outback art centers.

BY ROBERT BERLIND

The strange, as it were *invisible* beauty of Australia, which is undoubtedly there, but which seems to lurk just beyond the range of our white vision. You feel you can't *see*—as if your eyes hadn't the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape. For the landscape is so unimpressive, like a face with little or no features, a dark face. It is so aboriginal, out of our ken, and it hangs back so aloof.

—D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*

By taking to the bush, the convict left England and entered Australia. Popular sentiment would praise him for his transvaluation of the landscape (though at a safe distance) for another hundred and fifty years.

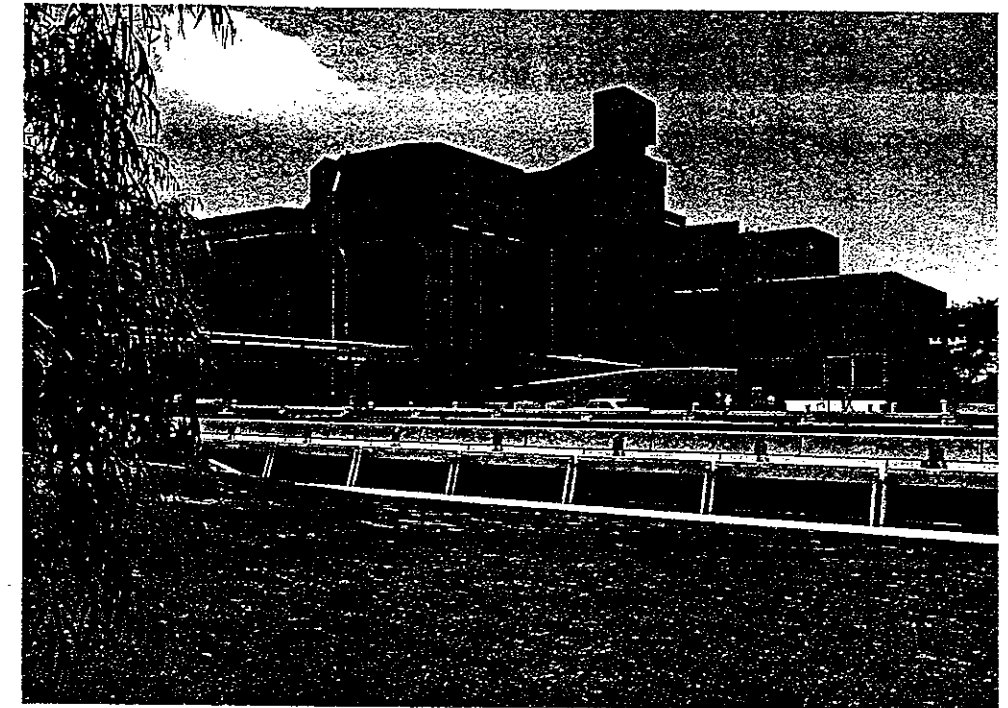
—Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*

Sydney, May 30, 1992

After the interminable flight from San Francisco to Sydney I have propped myself up over a cappuccino at an airport café table in the warm winter sun. When painter Alun Leach-Jones, who has arranged for my six-week stay as artist-in-residence at the University of New South Wales, arrives to take me into town, I am just finishing Bruce Chatwin's best-seller, *The Songlines*. It's an engaging, messy string of speculations on nomadism, carnivorous evolution and much else, all in the form of a first-person narrative set in central Australia. "Ah!" Leach-Jones exclaims, "That's just what Kiefer was reading when he came out." It seems Kiefer went on to lecture in Adelaide about some of the notions addressed in the book, grafting nomadic, Aboriginal understandings of the land (via Chatwin) onto the tree of German idealism. The near inevitability of projecting one's own frame of reference onto this continent will quickly emerge as a common theme here.

Much of the first and second weeks of my winter stay is spent with the painting students of the University's College of Fine Arts, located in the lively neighborhood of Paddington. Their drawing, by and large, is strong, often based on the intractable outback landscape. Several enterprising teachers regularly include drawing and painting forays of up to ten days as part of their courses. The students' sense of paint surface is less assured, which is not so surprising given their unfamiliarity with so much art that American or Western European students see firsthand as part of their study. It is common for Australian artists to travel extensively after completing their studies; indeed, it is understood to be a necessity even by those who argue for an Australian set of esthetic priorities.

Just what these priorities might be is a fundamental question that I'll hear expressed in many ways, from discussion of how to escape imposing



View of the National Gallery of Australia (formerly Australian National Gallery), designed by Colin Madigan with modifications by Anders Andersens, constructed 1974-81.

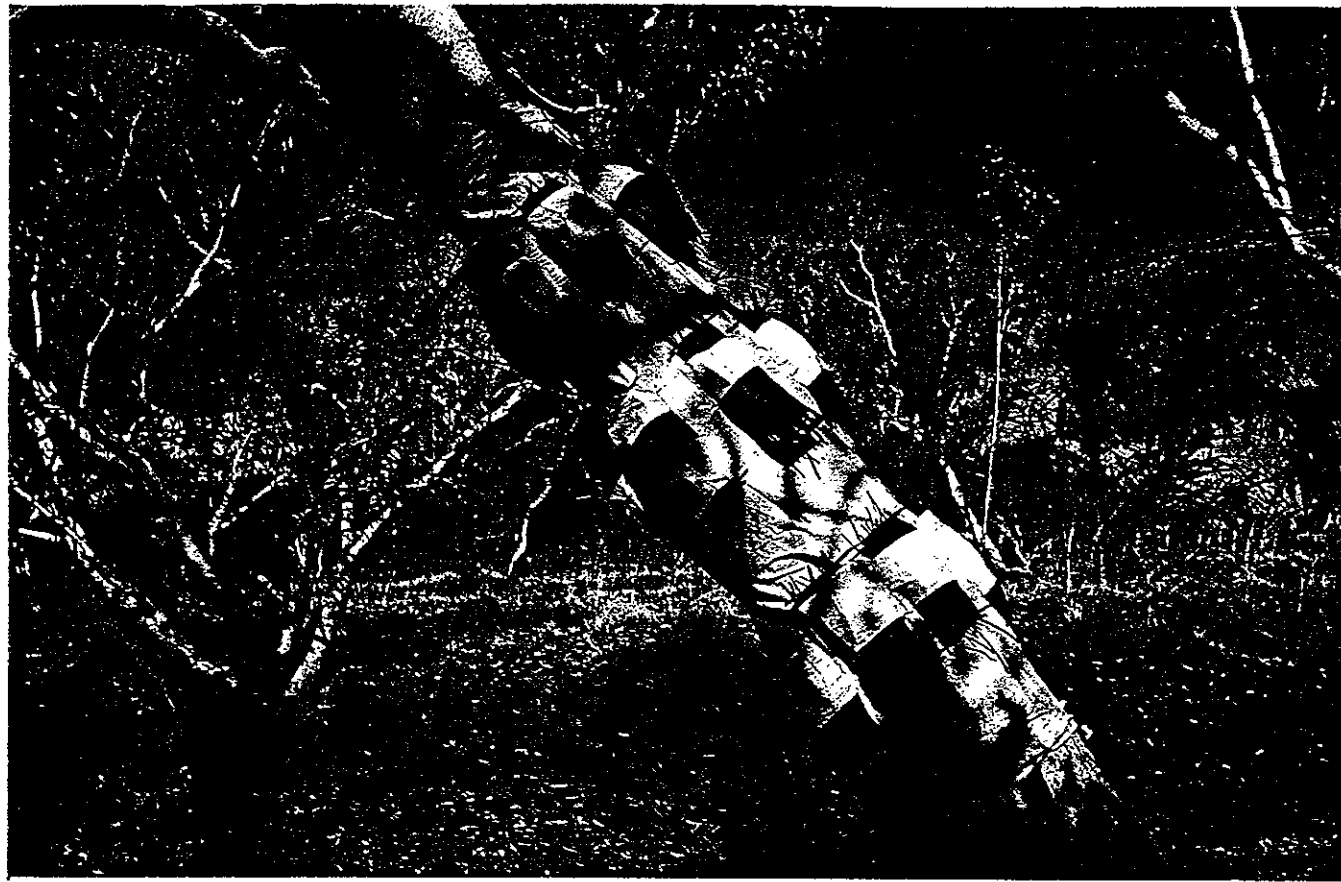
European landscape conventions onto the radically dissimilar Australian landscape to a much publicized flap about whether actor Paul Hogan's televised pitch for tourism properly projects the informal, forthright, generous nature of the Aussies or, as prime minister Paul Keating put it, the image of a rowdy bunch of yabbos. The question of Australian identity is a ubiquitous though not an especially consuming one.

Is this society urban and cosmopolitan, as time spent in Sydney or Melbourne would lead you to believe? Or does the ancient, empty vastness of the outback more properly determine the inhabitants' identity, even if the great majority of Australians have never ventured more than a hundred miles from the coast? (The situation calls to mind Canada, with its icons of northern wilderness and a southern border-hugging population.) What should be made of the short, often tragic history of this one-time British penal colony? Is the country basically an extension of the British Isles and their various cultures? Is it becoming a South Pacific California? Or will it now, as Keating and others have urged, begin to see its orientation as Asian and Pacific? What place should the Aboriginal culture and people assume? Much of contemporary Australian art and cultural discourse seems directly or indirectly focused on such questions.

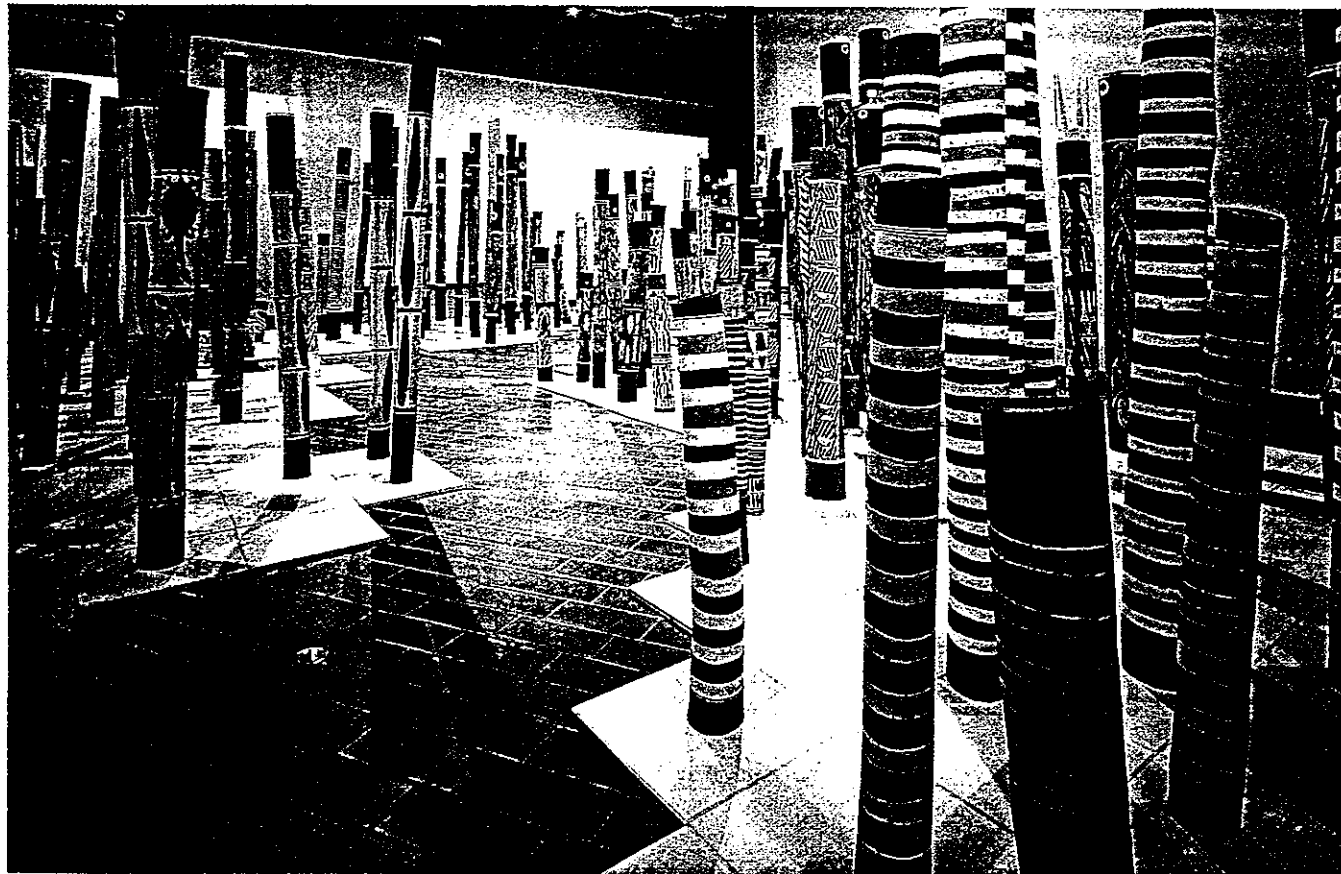
It is startling to be reminded in various ways just

how recently the country began to overcome its sense of extreme isolation. "When did you come out?" I am asked, and I wonder how long where one lives can remain "out." Everyone but the Aborigines has an emigration story. One friend recalls his mother, a third-generation Australian who had never traveled, referring always to faraway England as "home." For artists this sense of distance and displacement has been and in some ways still is crucial. Only since the '70s has it been possible to see not only post-World War II American painting but also modern European art in the flesh, and there is still not so very much to be found.

Many museum, gallery and studio visits make evident the centrality of landscape to Australian art today. If the diverse approaches to the genre, which range from relatively straight description to nature-based abstraction, have anything in common, it is their search for an authentically Australian form that will be independent of conventions developed on the other side of the world. This is not just a matter of representation per se but of developing an independent visual culture. The significance of landscape painting here comes not only from the general notion that any culture is specific to its locale but also from the problematics of picturing this severe and palpably ancient continent: the genre itself is emblematic of



John Davis: Tree Piece, Stuart Creek Near Billiluna, North Western Australia, 1992, mixed mediums, 48 inches high and 18 inches in diameter.



Installation view of "The Aboriginal Memorial," 1987-88, natural pigments on wood. Collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



William Robinson: Creation Series: Man and the Spheres, 1991, oil on canvas, one of three panels, 6 by 8 feet. Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney.

a larger challenge to European-rooted consciousness. The prestige of Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, the late Sidney Nolan and others associated with the anti-abstract group known as the Antipodeans rests in part on their insistence on a mythologizing, vernacular style and often narrative subject matter. I can only guess that a general gratitude for their contributions toward a sense of national identity accounts for the uncritical acceptance of their very uneven output.

At Sydney's Art Gallery of New South Wales issues of landscape predominate. William Robinson combines complex perspectives of the tropical Queensland rain forest that invert and bend space while describing nature minutely. It is as though the dense botanical growth itself, closely examined, were strangely disorienting. English-born John Wolseley combines travel notes, accounts of wildlife and intimate drawings in a way that suggests the explorations of the great 19th-century naturalists as well as those of such peripatetic art-world contemporaries as Hamish Fulton. These fragments are mounted together to form large, delicate paintings. John Olsen's retrospective shows an abiding concern for seeing the land and its denizens freshly and in their own distinctly non-European terms. How astonishing to find an artist of Olsen's range and power who has never shown in the U.S.! (See my review of his work in this issue.) Or shouldn't I be surprised, instead, to discover my own tacit assumption that everything of exceptional value must necessarily surface in New York?

Many landscape artists are associated with particular milieus. Guy Warren's painterly lyricism evokes the coastal rain forest south of Sydney as the site of implied narratives, journeys that are both personal and archetypal. Max Miller does close, on-site studies of desert flora and evinces a naturalist's sensibility in his quasi-abstract paintings. Ian Grant makes modest, precise, dreamlike images that derive from the tablelands between Sydney and Canberra. Tim Storrier's persistent theme of lengths of burning rope evokes the devastating brush fires that can stretch for hundreds of

The importance accorded landscape painting in Australia today becomes quickly evident. Simply picturing this severe and palpably ancient continent is an act of national self-assertion.

devices but without presumption or self-consciousness. They are modest, gently humorous, and zenlike in their quiet concentration. When I met Davis he was preparing for a trip to Balgo, an Aboriginal community in the Western Australia desert some 860 kilometers west of Alice Springs, to work jointly with their artists. In the past he has done collaborations in India and Japan. Davis is one of a number of artists I have met here whose orientation is more toward Asia than toward the West, although he is well traveled and has represented his country at the Venice Biennale.

Since the above entry, Davis has gone and returned. He writes:

I guess I passed about six cars on the whole trip [from Alice Springs to Balgo and back]. Balgo itself is very isolated, a small community with clinic, school, store, airport, mission and simple housing and campsites for the passing Aboriginal groups. . . . There are about 150 artists (men & women) in the area, who just paint & don't think about careers like us. The money is shared around the family if a painting is sold, & the painting itself is non-precious. I saw a dog piss on one painting by a very important artist but nobody cared. They are sometimes carried on their heads to keep the sun off. . . . My intention was to go out to a small community & stay for a few days, working on a piece alongside their activities, but unfortunately a young man died unexpectedly & a very complicated mourning process extended over 10 days which included everybody (even from hundreds of kilometers away) so that it would have been inappropriate for me to go out to the community. The mourning rites include [apportioning] blame for the death, so that blows & spearings can take place—more as a ritual than actual harm, although alcohol upsets the balances & the clinic was busy for a few days.



Guy Warren: Untitled, 1992, oil and acrylic on canvas, 67 by 120 inches.

Canberra, June 7-9

To resolve the dispute between Sydney and Melbourne, each coveting the honor of being Australia's capital city, the decision was made in 1908 to plunk Canberra down on an uninhabited locale between them. The city's plan and core of arcaded buildings were designed by the Chicago architect Walter Burley Griffin, who provided continuous belts of parkland which give the effect of a generously laid-out university campus. Although there is a major university in the city (with an excellent school of visual arts), this is basically a place for political affairs. Apart from roving bands of teenagers looking for something to do, there is a strange emptiness, at least away from the mobs at the Australian National Gallery, where the Rubens show is about to close.

The A.N.G. was designed by Sydney architect Colin Madigan, who also did the impressive High Court next door. As with the controversial 1988 Parliament House here, the intent was clearly to make a large design statement that would project a national identity. The resulting plan was magisterial to a fault, dwarfing even the most hubris-driven art of the '80s that it was destined to house. After considerable controversy, with Madigan standing firm behind his design, Anders Andersens, also of Sydney, was brought in to modify the plan to make for greater intimacy and flexibility. (Andersens is also responsible for the modifications of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the design of Sydney's new Contemporary Museum.)

The offerings of the A.N.G.'s three principal ground-floor galleries seem in separate ways to exemplify larger issues in Australian art today and so bear some discussion here. There is a much-publicized blockbuster, "Rubens and the Italian Renaissance," a double exhibition of Aboriginal art, and a part of the permanent post-World War II collection.

"Rubens" has broken all previous attendance records in the gallery. For a great many Australians, who have been neither to Europe nor to America, this is the first chance to see these works (apart from the seven paintings and four drawings that reside in Australian collections). I suspect that the appeal of the show to most viewers must be less substantive than auratic. The exhibition's premise is scholarly and only partially borne out by the work on view, the focus being on Rubens's deliberate raid on various conventions and innovations of the Italian Renaissance. An ambitious show such as this that seeks, along with presenting its thesis convincingly, to bridge the gap between Australia and the major collections of the Western world must, of course, work within severe limitations. A curator must begin with what is available, then cobble together the rest as best he or she can. Here one feels the strain, even the impossibility of doing full justice to the original ambition. While Rubens's virtuosic 1608 oil sketch *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is shown in the catalogue to derive from Correggio's *Adoration*, painted in 1530, the latter's *Martyrdom of Four Saints*, a wonderful but hardly apposite work, is the one included in the exhibition. Nor are there any of the many original Titians to compare with Rubens's copies in the show. (Even better would have been comparisons where Rubens

freely interpreted Titian, such as their respective versions of Adam and Eve.) Along with many excellent drawings and superb paintings by Caravaggio, Correggio, Tintoretto, Veronese, Titian (and his workshop), and Rubens himself, there is much third-rate work.

One is left with the feeling that two distinct and not entirely compatible agendas have motivated "Rubens and the Italian Renaissance," one scholarly, the other popular, and that neither has been fully satisfied. At the same time, the thesis, as developed in the catalogue, is creditable and of real interest, and there is much on view to delight the eye.

Another of the National Gallery's principal ground-floor spaces holds "The Aboriginal Memorial." Created in 1987-88, it is the work of 43 artists in and around Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land, in the tropical Northern Territory. The "Memorial" consists of 200 upright log coffins made of trees that have been hollowed out by termites, then ceremonially cut down, cleaned and painted with various clans' totemic designs. Normally these would house the bones of the dead after they were



John Olsen: Clarendon Spring, Make Sure the Sun Wipes Its Feet, 1984, oil on hardboard, 72 1/2 by 96 1/2 inches. Collection The Broken Hill City Art Gallery, N.S.W.

recovered from tree platforms on which the bodies had been left to decompose. The installation symbolizes the area around Ramingining, with coffin/logs arranged according to the locations of the various artists' respective clans in relation to the Glyde River, which is indicated by a meandering path through them. Finished in Australia's bicentennial year, the piece is intended as a "non-bicentennial," commemorating all the Aboriginal people who have lost their lives since 1788 defending their land. As explained in the wall texts and handouts, the curators at the A.N.G. arranged for the coffins to be made specifically for this installation; they are not decontextualized "artifacts."

Surrounding the traditional burial logs, on the gallery's walls, hangs a contrasting show of contemporary, mostly urban Aboriginal art that commemorates the 25th anniversary of the 1967 referendum to count Aborigines in the official census

and to allow the Commonwealth government to legislate on their behalf. These works correspond directly to work by Western artists concerned with cultural politics, combining traditional, culturally specific references with text, documentation and other postmodernist devices. Fiona Foley's *Lost Badjala's Severed Hair* combines wood, string, hair and five 19th-century photographs in an installation format that would be at home in SoHo. The most striking work for me is an acrylic-on-canvas painting by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri titled *Men's Camp at Lyrrpurrung*. Symbolic indications of sites and creatures (and narratives that remain cryptic to the uninitiated) float above a field of dots layered over a stained ground. The effect is to make the surface seem permeable and spatial rather than, as is often the case with Aboriginal painting, flat and maplike. In this grouping the painting seems more traditional than most of the art-school-informed work on the walls. That is, it partakes of two traditions, however ambiguously: one is modernist (specifically, at least for this viewer, Color Field painting), the other, the ceremonial body-

and sand-painting of tribal Aborigines.

In another gallery devoted to contemporary, international art hangs Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's 1983 acrylic painting *Honey Ant and Dreaming Story*. On either side hang Kiefer's *Twilight of the West (Abendland)* (1989) and Cucchi's *Wind of the Black Roosters* (1983). Possum's painting is presented, without comment, in a contemporary, international context. In all three paintings earth colors predominate, and there is an implied thematic connection with the Kiefer, as though to support his avowed affinity with the Aboriginal *geist*. Yet the grouping is not quite comfortable or convincing: cultural context is not so easily subsumed by transavant-gardism.

The complex relation between contemporary, white Australian esthetic issues and aboriginality begins to be articulated here in the A.N.G. More investigation and discussions with such well-informed people as Ace Bourke, Adrian Newstadt

The question posed by the marketing of Aboriginal art is plain: How can work produced by people so recently part of a hunter-gatherer society speak to us authentically?

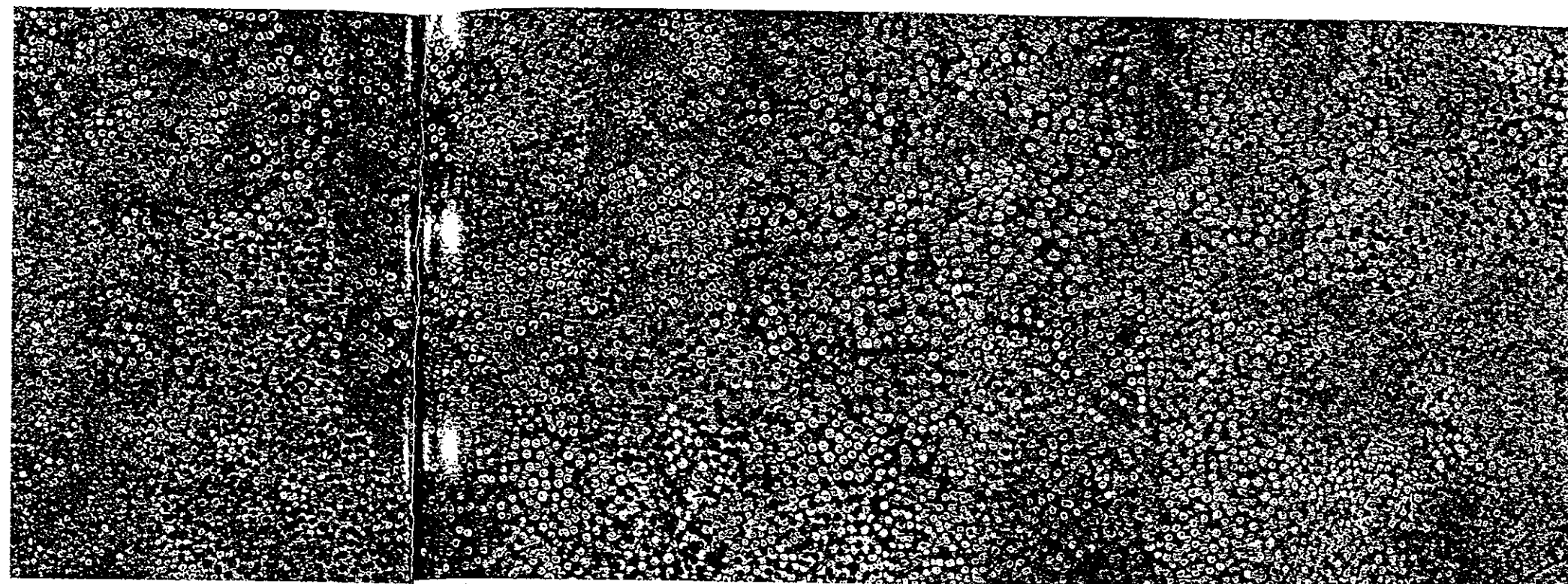
and Chris Hodges in Sydney and Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne will elucidate and complicate these issues further. (These people are, it should be said, dealers and champions of current Aboriginal painting, albeit with divergent views of their own proper roles. I was unable to meet the tribal artists themselves, who live mostly in the Western Desert.)

Back in Sydney, further questions about current Aboriginal art come up with each viewing. What are we to make of the often beautiful acrylic-on-canvas paintings produced by the artists of the Papunya and Utopia communities in central Australia? For Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, writing in "The Global Issue" of *Art in America* (July '89), the situation stinks of colonialist exploitation. "The whole phenomenon," they assert, "is a marketing strategy that has been carefully stage-managed by non-Aboriginal bureaucrats and art dealers with the possibility of Aboriginal self-management receding ever further into the future." There is no question that the deprecation of Aboriginal culture and community by Europeans

ranks with the worst horror stories of genocide and ethnocide; certainly there is much to be done by way of economic reparations, acknowledgment of land rights, the return of sacred objects and so on.

Fry and Willis argue for such cultural venues as the Central Australia Media Association in Alice Springs and, in general, Aboriginal control over electronic media as more crucial to the survival of an evolving indigenous culture than the hybrid form of acrylic on canvas. (One might say the same of the seemingly more authentic bark paintings of the Northern Territory, which are also an innovation influenced by the modern culture of commodification.) Should these paintings, then, be regarded as inherently corrupt? Should they be made, but not shown in white-controlled museums and galleries? Is there any way that art made by people so recently part of a hunter-gatherer society can speak to us legitimately, authentically?

My own response, when I consider how much of the Aboriginal work has become generic and mass-produced, is that this is indeed a false, manipulated situation. But, face to face with paintings by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri or Marjorie Napaljarri or Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula or any number of extraordinary painters whose work has amazed me, I can't help but feel that other questions come into play. These questions are not so much in the nature of doubting the propriety of the situation as in probing my own relation to what I see. A case in point is the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a much-publicized woman in her 80s who works in Utopia, in the Northern Territory. During my time in Sydney she has no less than two ample solo exhibitions at the Hogarth and Utopia Art Galleries. Shortly before leaving I learn that an especially beautiful 5-by-14-



Emily Kngwarreye: *Untitled, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 65 by 139 inches.* Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales.

foot painting has been bought by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Its surface is a profusion of rather "painterly" dots (unlike the more discrete, precise marks of most Aboriginal painting) in a range of subtle earth tones evoking the color, light and space of the Australian desert.

I can determine in this work an aerial view, a mapping, and, simultaneously, a closer reading of the ground underneath the viewer's feet. No doubt, as with most Aboriginal painting, there are also embedded narrative elements that would require further explanation. My New York eyes see a gorgeous Color Field abstraction here as well. The essential and inevitable question is one that might arise in any cross-cultural situation: how does what I see and think in front of her painting correspond to what *she* sees and intends? Chris Hodges, an artist who runs the Utopia Art Gallery in his former studio in the unfashionable suburb of Stanmore, tells me of a conversation with her: "Emily, what is this painting about?" He describes her hand rising up and over her shoulder in an encompassing gesture as she says simply, "Whole lot." A whole lot? The whole lot? There is indeed a cosmic implication in the work, just as one might imagine galaxies in a Pollock. With Pollock, though, I am aware of the work's polyvalence, its simultaneous references to materiality, gesture, myth, nature and its particular historical moment.

And here is the problem. However much we may dream of art as an unmediated expression, we know perfectly well that it depends on historically and culturally specific conventions. If Emily Kngwarreye and I relate to what she has made in entirely different ways, how shall I think about the esthetic status of the work or of my experience in front of it? Further, because I find that some of her paintings

lack entirely the power and beauty of her "best" work, I must conclude that the qualities *she* values most consistently are not those that I esteem or that are even apparent to me.

Some of her paintings "fail" because of muddled, possibly hurried paint application. Others move into a sweet palette that may refer to the desert in flower; but that explanation does nothing to redeem them for me. What is to be done? Shall I simply bring my own perceptions, criteria and taste to bear and let the rest take care of itself? I am, of course, curious to explore the anthropological literature and to learn what I can through anecdote and am, most of all, interested in meeting the artists themselves, although that will not happen on this trip.

By and large I find that the dealers with whom I speak are genuinely concerned for the welfare of their artists and in some cases work hard to develop their careers and to help sustain the art-producing communities. All agree that the esthetic status, not to say the value, of the work is problematic and that there is much to be done on a theoretical/critical level with regard to the questions I raise. My provisional conclusion is that this very confusion lends a sense of enterprise to one's encounter with Aboriginal painting, and that, lacking a clear sense of context, the viewer's discoveries and pleasures retain the edge that comes with any inherent uncertainty.

Perhaps because white Australian history is shorter even than ours and is constantly contrasted with some 40,000 years of continuous native culture, white consciousness of despoiled Aboriginal life is more insistent than in the U.S. Quite apart from the general exploitation of Aboriginal motifs for commercial purposes, there is a genuine fascination among many artists with Aboriginal art, not least because it describes the land so convincingly.

I saw several instances of white painters incorporating the dots, squiggles and mapping effects characteristic of indigenous art, sometimes combining them with a Western "view." Whether intended to provide some authentically Australian stamp or to express a sentimental attachment to the "primitive," such devices seem almost always to backfire. John Olsen is the notable exception, and his use of marks that might be derived from Aboriginal art is part of a larger field of references.

Melbourne, June 21-26

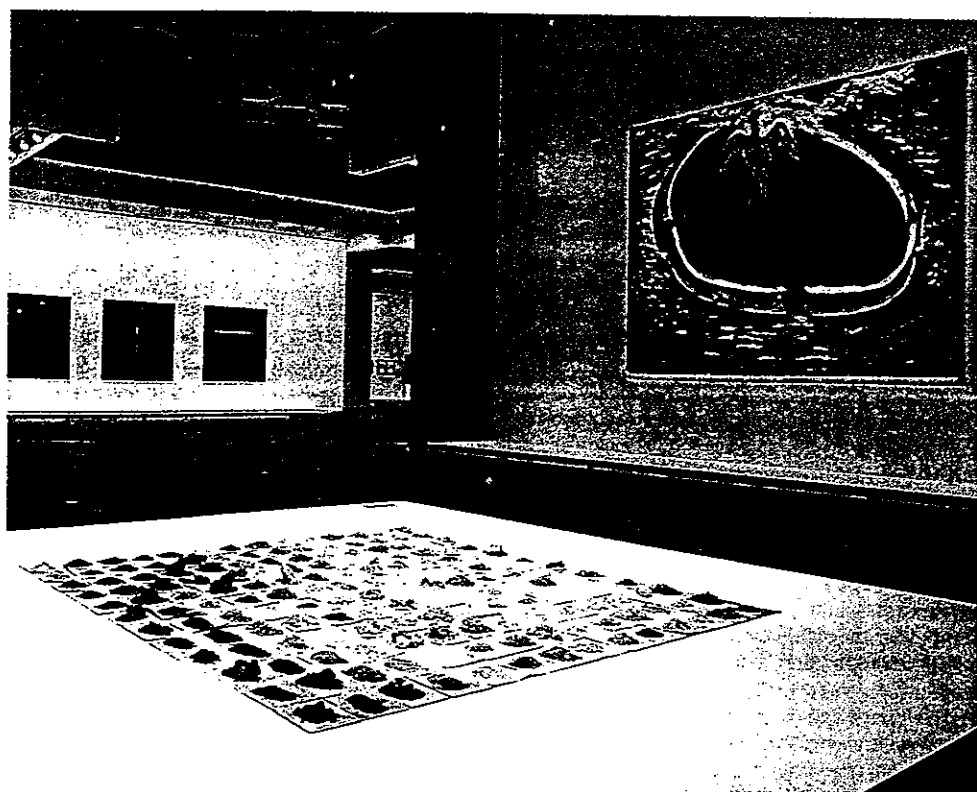
Comparisons between Melbourne and Sydney are a conversational staple of sorts that has Sydney, with its hills and seaside setting, playing San Francisco to Melbourne's decentralized, sprawling, gridded Los Angeles. But John Davis tells me the opposite is nearer the truth: that brash, fast-track Sydney is like L.A., and the more conservative, Victorian and "serious" Melbourne is closer to S.F. It is generally thought that the art scene in Melbourne is tougher, more professional. The *feel* of many of Melbourne's galleries, set in industrial loft spaces, is certainly familiar, and there is, at least at the time of my visit, a greater consciousness of what is current in New York. In the past, though, Melbourne has been associated with landscape painting, both its traditionalist and modernist forms affirming a local sensibility, while Sydney has been seen as abstractionist and internationalist. Today I find no evidence of such a distinction.

Many artists show in both cities, although only Australian Galleries (a commercial venue) has a branch in both places. Such Melbourne galleries as Christine Abrahams, City Gallery, Luba Bilu, Pinacotheca, Realities and perhaps a dozen more

that I visited have a range from upscale/elegant to loft/funk. All seem to be esthetically serious and commercially viable. In Sydney the same applies to Coventry, Irving, Rex Irwin, Macquarie, Ray Hughes, Roslyn Oxley9 and a number of others. It is evident that despite the global recession, there are private and corporate collectors, a good deal of state and federal patronage, and a growing degree of public sophistication.

One of Melbourne's extraordinary structures is the Royal Exhibition Building, designed by Victorian architects Joseph Reed and Frederick Barnes. A vast structure with a monumental dome and unbroke, spacious interior illuminated by a clerestory, it calls to mind the Crystal Palace and expresses the same expansive, entrepreneurial spirit. In 1988 and '90 it housed the first two biennial Australian contemporary art fairs, produced by the Australian Commercial Galleries Association and funded by private and public monies. [The 1992 fair, in October, included over 75 galleries from Europe, North America and the Far East.]

One of the most impressive studios to be seen is the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. The weavers, all artists in their own right, perform astounding feats with their medium, translating paintings, even watercolors, into large tapestries. More than merely reproducing these works at large scale they reinterpret each of them, obviously relishing the artistic and technical difficulties involved. They customarily are involved with the artists at each stage of the development of the tapestry, sometimes making suggestions of their own, so that there is an element of collaboration. At the moment an enormous work is on the loom, about one third completed, commissioned for Sydney's international airport. It is based on a modestly scaled abstract gouache by

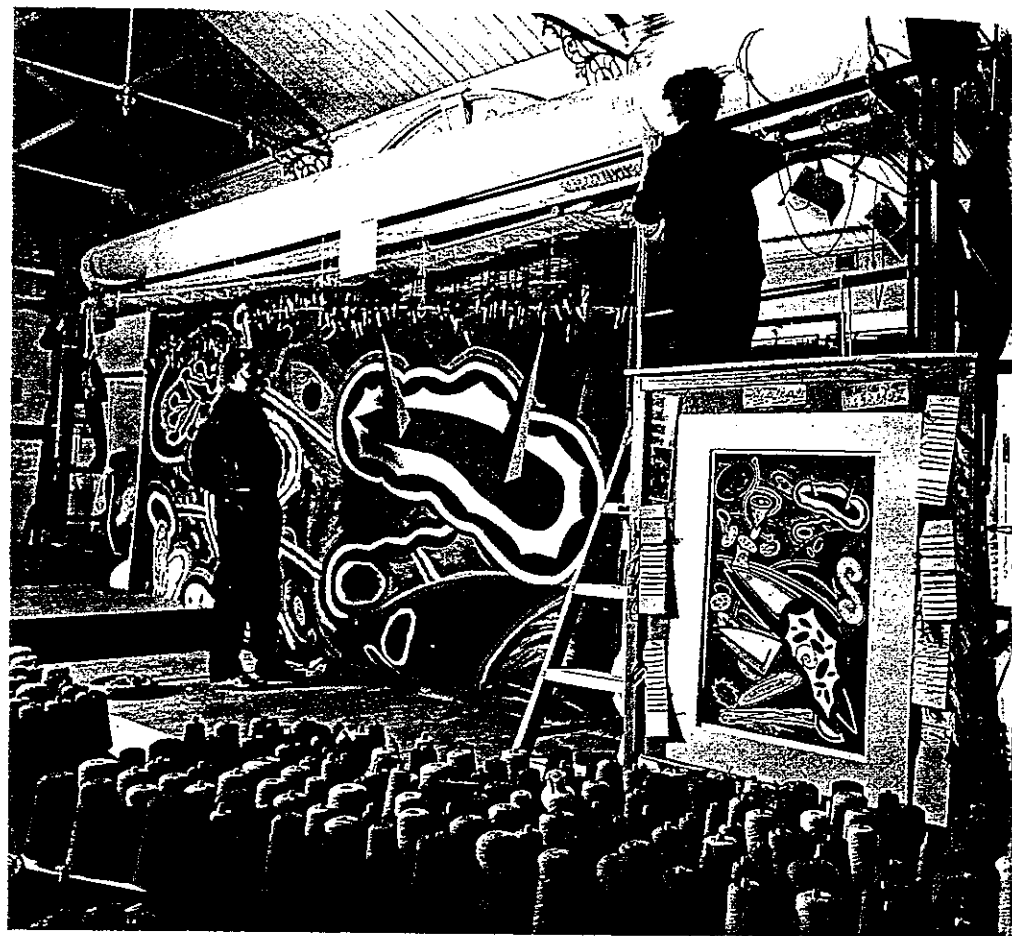


View of a gallery devoted to international contemporary art at the National Gallery of Australia, showing (foreground) Nikolaus Lang's *Earth Samples, 1978-79* and (right) Enzo Cucchi's *Wind of the Black Roosters, 1983, oil on canvas.*

The art scene in Melbourne is generally thought to be tougher than the one in brash, fast-track Sydney, but many artists show in both cities, and distinctions are fading.

Alun Leach-Jones that juxtaposes hard-edge and painterly elements. The weavers must take into account not only the recasting of the work into another medium but also the radical increase in size to 23 feet by 15 feet. Their enthusiasm is palpable; the piece will be a knockout. It seems that most of Australia's major contemporary artists (as well as some whose commissions keep the pot boiling) have had tapestries done here, either through corporate or public funding.

Not for the first time I am struck by the enormous disparity between public support for the arts in the U.S. and in virtually all of the other wealthy nations of the world. The Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council does much to financially assist institutions, individual artists, publications and overseas initiatives. The council's policy, which by all reports is adhered to, calls for an "arm's length" principle which ensures that decisions on arts support are made at a distance from the political processes of Government, and there are also provisions for peer review of those being assessed. Further, AUSTRADE, the Australian Trade Commission, supports commercial initiatives with a view to exporting art and fostering interest in it abroad. (Indeed, as an art writer, I am receiving logistical and financial assistance from AUSTRADE during my own visit.)



View of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne, showing a portion of Alun Leach-Jones's wool tapestry *Terra Australis*, 1992, 23 by 15 feet.

At Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria (the N.G.V.) is a large exhibition, "Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle." In 1904 Bell, a conservative realist already in his 50s, traveled to England and the Continent to "find the golden key to Modern Art" (his words). Returning, he became the most important teacher of his generation, bringing the news back to the Antipodes. The N.G.V. show juxtaposes his own paintings with examples of work by the many that he influenced as well as by artists who did not study with him but are here proposed as reflecting his legacy. That Bell could have been such an influence shows how provincial the situation was, for everything here is wrong. Both his paintings and the wall texts quoting his pedagogic maxims make it clear that his understanding of the modern movement was skewed from the beginning. Although he spent two years in Paris studying in various ateliers, including La Grande Chaumière, London became his principal home until his return to Melbourne in 1920. In England he saw the epochal Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, but the modernism that he absorbed was a tepid English variant, seemingly as informed by literary sources (notably Roger Fry) as by the art itself. Taking modernism as a just cause, he transferred his allegiance from a moribund academic tradition to a stillborn set of esthetic principles. He had his students paint from studies rather than from life and encouraged glazing rather than direct painting. In both instances his fundamental misunderstanding is evident; modernist painting,

after all, was essentially a form of improvisation in front of the subject. The fact that Bell had the credibility to establish himself as a considerable force in Melbourne attests to his personal charisma, surely, but also to just how desperate the situation then was.

In some ways the problems with the exhibition (guest-curated by Felicity Moore) are typical of curatorial difficulties that seem everywhere apparent in Australia. What ought to have been a small historical show, perhaps in a university gallery, has been blown out of proportion to become an uncritical celebration of a legend. The range of quality from the excellent work of Drysdale, Vassiliev and Williams to the amateurish daubing of completely undistinguished followers does nothing to clarify the history of this episode.

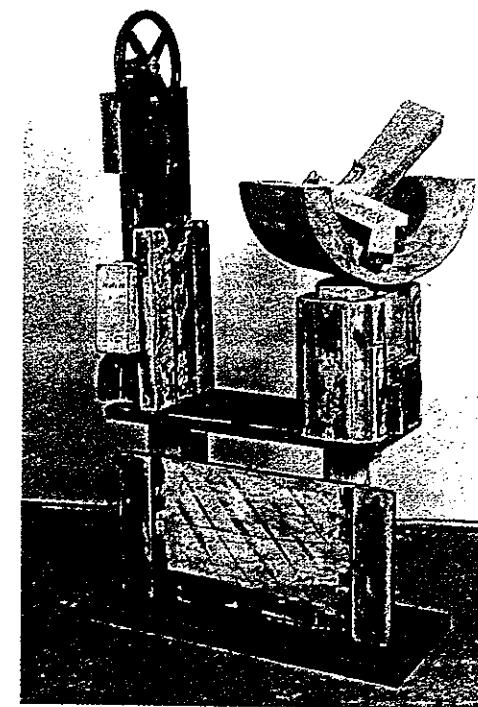
The large retrospective of John Perceval that is also on view at the N.G.V. suffers from the same refusal of curatorial selectiveness. Perceval, born in 1923, made very powerful, dourly expressive urban images during the early 1940s and later developed a fluent, juicy, descriptive style of landscape, flower and figure painting. Like Boyd and his Antipodean colleagues, he was wildly uneven, in his case partly as a result of alcoholism and mental illness. During whole periods of his life he seems to have been painting on automatic, churning out repetitive and rather awful work. A quite memorable exhibition a third the size of this one could have been put together and would have better served both the artist and his public.

Tibooburra, N.S.W., July 2-5

A two-day drive with a congenial group of painters in three vehicles has brought us to northwestern New South Wales, well "back of Bourke" (as the expression goes), where we stopped for lunch and a tour of its fine, Federation style (ca. 1901) courthouse. The others are on a two-week outing to paint the severe and awesome country, which is like our southwestern desert, only much more extreme. My three days can only amount to a look, but even the drive here—stopping to experience the desert sunset and its afterglow in the crystalline air—has been profoundly affecting. Tibooburra is a small collection of corrugated-tin-roofed buildings that house a general store/gas station, a school that broadcasts lessons to isolated towns and sheep stations, a post office, some dwellings and two pubs, all flanking one unpaved road. The pub we are staying in is run by Marlene Pugh, first wife of the late Clifton Pugh, who came out here regularly to paint and is responsible for some of the booze-fueled murals that adorn the place. Our own days of working are followed by somewhat more temperate merriment and conversation.

Asked one evening what I shall write and what problems I find with the country's art scene. I venture that one salient issue is the search for an Australian identity, a project that could be better served within the art world than it has been thus far. There does not, for one thing, seem to be a sufficient community of critics and commentators generating the sort of discourse that might illuminate questions of identity. The expatriation of such people as Patrick McCaughey, Robert Hughes and the late Paul Taylor may reflect the sense of limited possibilities among art writers here. (Hughes's collected essays, *Nothing if Not Critical*, seems to be on every artist's bookshelf.)

I find also a common curatorial failing in the pre-



Robert Klippel: R.K. No. 684, 1988, painted wood, 57½ by 35 by 22½ inches. Courtesy Walters Gallery, Sydney.

sentation of Australian art in the public galleries (we would say museums). The best hangs with the worst, as though through some misguided democratic impulse to present the entire cultural patrimony. Why is so much negligible art of a half century ago still hanging? And, conversely, why are the best artists given such slight attention? There are astoundingly good painters whose work I found tucked into mediocre collections with no special attention being paid. There is Lloyd Rees (1895-1988), whose small landscapes of the late '30s and '40s might be compared with Albert Pinkham Ryder's. Fred Williams (1927-1982) painted innovative, influential landscapes during the late '50s and '60s, and his work was often excellent before and after. Most inexplicable is the casual treatment accorded the Scottish-born Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), an eccentric who lived for years in China, Bali, the Philippines and finally on little Bribie Island off the Queensland coast. After first seeing three small Fairweathers at the Art Gallery of N.S.W. I was able to find only a few paintings hanging in Canberra and Melbourne. Nowhere could I find enough to give a larger sense of his work and development. It is not that these artists are unknown or lack passionate appreciation among people I've spoken with. The problem is that there is no cohesive collection of their work through which a visitor such as myself or, more importantly, an art student can encounter them. Why is it not a priority to have works from each period of these three artists—I could mention others as well—in every major museum? This failure to make discriminations has also dogged retrospectives, theme exhibitions and even solo gallery shows. Whatever we may think about the ways in which the notion of quality needs decon-

structing and however tendentious and partisan various comparative claims must be, critical distinctions are essential to the larger discourse on cultural identity.

Some Qualifications

None of the foregoing is intended to express the need for any reductive concept of "national character." Australia is as multiracial and multicultural as the U.S. and perhaps more consciously so. There are many strong "internationalists": formalist abstractionists, conceptual artists, political and media-oriented postmodernists, in short, the gamut. Many Australian artists and writers divide their time between home and Europe or America, and not a few, Mike Parr, conceptual artists, political and media-oriented postmodernists, in short, the gamut. Many Australian artists and writers divide their time between home and Europe or America, and not a few, Mike Parr and Immants Tillers, for example, have global reputations. Such artists often see no special esthetic issues attached to working in Sydney or Melbourne rather than Berlin, London or Los Angeles. This is, perhaps, especially so of the

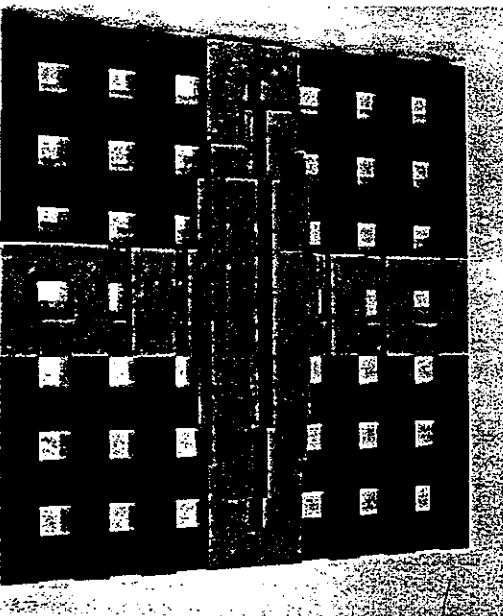


Ian Fairweather: *Roi Soleil*, 1956-57, gouache on paperboard, 39 by 28½ inches. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.

many who have immigrated, but it is no less true of many artists born and based here. Among the former, I met Cypriot-born Andrew Christofides, Welsh-born Alun Leach-Jones, English-born Hilarie Mais, Chinese-born Graham Kuo, all now based in Sydney. In the studio of Robert Klippel, perhaps the country's most celebrated sculptor, were large, odd-angled agglomerations of painted wooden blocks, old machine parts and architectural elements, brought together to form quasi-surrealist *personages* and less specific images. These display an eccentricity that may or may not be Australian in character. I would say the same about the richly allusive combine-paintings of Colin Lanceley and the slightly



Brett Whiteley: *Baudelaire's Drive*, 1975, oil on canvas, 90 by 75 inches. Courtesy Kym Bonython Gallery, Sydney.



Hilarie Mais: *Fold*, 1992, oil paint on timber, 38½ by 38½ by 1½ inches. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, N.S.W.