

# **The 'Primitive' Landscape: Country, Colonialism & Culture**

## **Assignment 1**

Art and the Environment 315  
Visual Cultural Studies

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## **Prologue**

### *Lecture*

"... Australia's Aborigines have a 'special relationship with the land', Like most 'primitive' cultures this relationship is symbiotic and requires a particular ideology to sustain it. Compared to the idea of material development and consumerism dominant in western culture this older ideology was, during the modern era of European history, seen as inferior and naive. This lecture will illustrate the complexity and sophistication practised by Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures; especially in the set of relations associated with the landscape" Goddard, J. (1999 p. 3)

### *Tutorial*

Compare and contrast a painting / artwork by a traditional Aboriginal artist with that of contemporary European artist who in some way represents landscape in his/her art.

### *Assignment*

Examine the key issues that the selected artist deals with in his /her art in either cultural paradigm.

## Introduction

This paper examines several key issues governing the term 'landscape' with reference to the Anglo-European culture of Australia and that of the Australian Aboriginal culture. The divisibility of nature and perception is questioned throughout.

*"... Although we are accustomed to separate nature and perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be reposing for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its is scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock." Schama S. (1995, p.6)*

Both artists Peter Booth and Rover Thomas have used landscape as an expressive vehicle or metaphor for dramatized realities with their associated historical scenarios. The overtones of colonization, tribal ritual and subconscious memory however, pervade each artist's painterly expression.

The observed landscape is built up also by the interjection of these historical nuances and subconscious icons. The correspondence of art history with that of 'observed' landscape will be built up in the examination of these two key Australian painters both of strikingly different upbringings, yet both committed to similar principles, illuminating their own anxieties and fears for their respective culture.

## The 'primitive' landscape

The notion that Australia was once part of one continent, led European settlers to interpret and categorize Aboriginal art as 'primitive' in the struggle to describe that which was unknown, according to Carter (1987). This is coined as 'mytholising in the absence of mythology'.

Carter illustrates for the reader in various historical narratives the difficulties Western culture has had in trying to include Aboriginal ideology in their own eclectic 'traveling discourse'. This struggle by the material and consumer driven western culture to draw comparisons with other cultures for example, occasionally used mere coincidences of phonology solely. The comparative

process he believes was an attempt to attest empirical ownership of the Aboriginal by breaking the bond of a complex ideological symbiosis they have with the land.

The genocide and oppression that ensued only attests to the inability of this 'sophisticated' Western culture to relate to the complexity of the relationship of this so called 'primitive' Aboriginal culture had and has with the land. A classic example of this need to attest ownership and begging reconciliatory illumination ever since is evident in the statement;

*"... The very application of the term art to things made by Aboriginal people has been interpreted by some critics as an act of cultural colonialism" Sutton, P. (1988, p.3)*

The image Sutton (1988) builds, illustrates the misconception or stereotype of Aboriginals being of the "gondwanaland" archipelago with attributions made in isolation to Aboriginal culture. This only adds to what Carter (1987) has suggested previously as being the factor governing the term 'primitive'.

The dispossession of land (Country) and oppression of Western European culture in all forms of colonization has resulted according to Haller, Opstelten and Ormrod (1994) in the 'destruction of traditional cultural symbiosis and the emergence of urbanized iconographic representation steeped in Western aestheticism'. Jurra (1998) in contrast states that there can be no "true art, culture or 'home' in Australia" without a reconciliation taking place between non indigenous Australians and the ideology of the Aboriginal Spirit of the land.

The notion of 'primitive' Jurra argues is little more than a colonist term used by Europeans inconclusively trying to place themselves higher in a historical framework of cultural development. True development he also argues must be permeated with cultural specifics and not shallow Western ideological Criteria. The Aboriginal Spirit of the land known as 'Tjukurrpa' or the 'Dreaming' is expressed in two ways according to Jurra (1998, p.4).

The Dreaming (from the beginning) is the land of all description and the people who live in it. The physical world and that of the Dreaming are one and the same, with symbolic forms such as the Mimi or Wandjinas created as figurative depiction of travelers in each realm according to Haller, Opstelten and Ormrod (1994).

This is supported by Carter (1998) who asks 'the white man' or 'wadjela', a traditional Noongar language naming term, to realize paintings that an Aboriginal completes often incorporate not just colour and style, but complex stories of the Dreamtime Spirit.

## **Rover Thomas**

The inextricable links between the Dreamtime and Rover Thomas's depiction of landscape in the painting 'Yari Country' (1989, Art and Australia p.396) show how the beliefs of ownership, belonging and place coincide with the personal and collective culture to which each individual belongs.

Forms delineated with dots that have been developed into landscape using ochre on bark, have captured the attention of western art critics who find his work 'simplistic' yet powerfully informative. Rovers creative work contains divisions of fields of colour and related geometric patterns representing differing manifestations of movement by humans and Spirit creatures known as the 'Mimi'.

Rover Thomas was born in 1926 at Kuka-Banya, in the Warburton Ranges, south of Australia's Great Sandy Desert. He started painting in his fifties drawing on traditional dot painting and symbolic 'abstracted planar perspectives' using traditional ochres, clays and charcoals with bush resins. Newstead (1998) portrays Rover as an experienced ex-stock hand cowboy, with mustering experience, who lived in an isolated area using a restricted palette and minimalist impression.

The resulting works Newstead relates are true to Rovers Dreaming as ceremonial custodian of this isolated landscape. Attribution has been made in this article to an incident specifically in 1975. Rover received visitations from a spirit of a deceased woman in a series of visionary encounters, anxieties

and many dreams (*as compared later in this paper, not unlike the experience of the European artist Peter Booth*)

As a result of coming to terms with the significance of these dreams Rover Thomas decided to produce art works encompassing both specific imagery relating to the Dreaming and the Kimberly landscape. Thomas used his traditional style of representation to depict more importantly, various incidents of Aboriginal massacres and genocidal activity inflicted by Western European culture on his people.

The disemboweling, burning and butchering of Aboriginal's in the Bedford Downs area when Rover was young evolved into works which are amongst his most powerful expressions, depicting iconically and symbolically gruesome reality and manifestations of his own horror - a war on his own people by foreign invaders.

Newstead (1988) mentions Rovers association with land also in the Malinup region of Western Australia as being sacred to his connection with Australian landscape, where he could feel free of the atmosphere of overuse and abuse he saw elsewhere. Landscape as an artistic expression impressed Rover became indivisible in terms of what could be seen, felt, experienced or 'dreamt' as stated and related.

## **Peter Booth**

According to McDonald (1998), landscape has been so thoroughly dismantled as a categorical expression in western art forms that it is difficult to view artworks which fundamentally incorporate trees, rivers, rocks and so on without expecting some form of subversive subtext.

With reference to the artist Peter Booth, a contemporary Anglo-European painter of considerable renown in contemporary Australia, these assumptions or subversive undertones are not apparent as an overt agenda for his 'landscape' settings. Booth draws on dreams, anxieties and memories of his own upbringing in Sheffield, England prior to Australian immigration.

Having enjoyed public acclaim for nearly two decades, Booth uses landscape as a setting for his symbolic eclecticism and disturbing figurative visions of mad humans. Booth used this conventional 'landscape' format as the central motif in his paintings in an exhibition at Deutscher Fine Art in 1994, consolidating his subjective interest in the disturbed environment that his surreal symbols, biomorphic forms and wild men inhabit.

This disturbed setting uses all the conventions of traditional painterly landscape format, yet interweaves a fabric of fantasy, apocalyptic and cathartic in nature according to McDonald (1998, p.55) An inclusion of one of his paintings titled '*Painting I*' in the '*Australian Visions*' exhibition in 1984, depicts a group of cannibals feasting greedily amidst heaps of dead flesh, which drew shock and disgust, yet collectively in critical art reviews at the time, provoked true horror and rang true for that political juncture in time.

It also set the mechanism for Booth to 'set' his fascinations, drawing on the vastness of Australian geography in his works ever since. The composition of figures and ritual feasting in concentric circles bears resemblance to the representational marks Rover Thomas makes in his work '*Yari' Country*' in 1989.

A critic quoted Foucault as the nearest descriptive mechanism to extrapolate Booths deeper meanings ;

“... by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself made aware of its guilt.” Foucault (1982, p. 285) as cited in McDonald (1998, p. 61)

The elemental symbols Booth's uses. such as fire, McDonald argues, signify death and regeneration in a destructive yet transformative unification of the madness of Western society with that of the natural world.



## Conclusion

Booth's apocalyptic 'visions' of cannibalism, death and torture interwoven with symbols such as snakes and evil angels are symbolically portrayed as the current violent transgression of Western society.

Subjective relationships with the natural world and the consequences of societal constraint, greed and ignorance depicted by Booth are comparable to the focus held by Rover Thomas yet differ in complexity. The respective settings of figurative composition with overtones of madness and violence, ostensibly creates the scene for what Peter Booth and Rover Thomas believe it is like to be living as a human on earth.

The depiction by Rover Thomas of white man's brutality to Aboriginals in Australia, reverberates with the same tendencies of humans as a species portrayed by Booth. Booth attempts however to delve into the psyche more generally and less culturally specific, referring to the "animal" in humans as the brutal element.

*"... the only way to rescue our animal energies is to revert to a Dionysian state of being, since the confinement and regimentation of these impulses by modern science, psychiatry and the penal system has driven them inward, producing potentially more dangerous impulses." Foucault ( 1982, p.285) as cited in McDonald (1998, p.61).*

It is evident that the reconciliatory attitude expressed by Jurra (1998) comes at a time when humans try to make sense of past and present events, reflected in the work that artist's Booth and Thomas create. The term 'primitive' therefore could apply to humans interaction as natural beings collectively, dispelling the notion of selective criteria indicating levels of cultural 'sophistication'.

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