

Art

Utopia

Utopia is a desert community in outback Australia, renowned for a group of remarkable Aboriginal artists. The women from this station are especially known for their acrylic painting and their batik: names like Emily Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre, Gloria Petyarre, Minnie Pwerle. Utopia is 240 kilometers northeast of Alice Springs, accessible only by four-wheel drive.

The name, Utopia, is apt, conveying the engagement of Aboriginal Dreamtime with a legendary aspirational space in European lore. *Utopia* captures the difference between European and Aboriginal notions of time and place. It renders the irony of Aboriginal life in postcolonial Australia, and the violence of European settlement that through malice and misadventure threatened to destroy Aboriginal cultures.

The story of how the Dreamings were revived and reinvented as icons on the international contemporary art scene is a utopic one in many ways. For some in the European world, it is indeed a utopia in which one *becomes* an artist in order to make a living. In 1994, as Vivien Johnson describes it:

In a population of seven hundred people, of whom more than half are young children, there are more than a hundred practising artists at Lajamanu, a statistic indicating a degree of artistic ferment that few places outside of New York could boast.

By the end of the 1980s, there was not a general store in any of the dozens of small communities dotted across the vast expanses of the Western Desert that did not stock paints and canvas to supply the local artists. (Johnson 1996: 41)

Every adult member of Western Desert Aboriginal society had a heritage of culture and training in the *jukurrpa* or Dreaming. This entitled them, as she observes, to embrace the vocation of artist: “and the way things were going, it looked as though they just might” (ibid.).

Dreaming

Kathleen Petyarre paints her *Mountain Devil Lizard* Dreaming canvases in a fine veil of dotting that resembles aerial photography of her Anan-khere country. Christine Nicholls characterizes the presence of the Dreaming in Petyarre’s canvases in this way: “Underneath the screen of Kathleen’s very fine dotting the Dreaming exists as a barely tangible, shadowy palimpsest, overwritten, in effect, by the surface colours and movement” (Nicholls and North, 2001:14).

But the English word *dreaming* is a poor translation of the Aboriginal concept that it attempts to name. Different words in different Aboriginal languages are called this Western state of unconsciousness: the Yolngu word *wangarr*, the Warlpiri *jukurrpa*, and the Arrernte (Aranda) *altyerrenge*. But Dreamings are not unconscious so much as a different kind of consciousness, a metaphysical apperception that permeates the physical world.

Spencer and Gillen first translated the Arrernte word as “Dreamtime” in 1896 (Morphy 1998:67–68). They justified this by noting the word

altyerre was used of “events associated with ancestral beings in mythic times and to representations of those times.” The word *altyerra* was also the word used for “dream,” and the suffix *-enge* signified possession: so, “Dreamtime” (*ibid.*).

But it would be wrong to see the word *Dreamtime* as a literal translation of an equivalent term in all Aboriginal languages. Some Aboriginal people dislike its connotation, since “the Dreaming” is “not a dream but a reality,” as they put it (Morphy 1998:67–68). Unlike *altyerre*, the Yolngu word *wangarr*, from Arnhem land, cannot be translated literally as Dreamtime, and Yolngu feel the connotation of illusion demeans the place of *wangarr* in culture.

To speak of Petyarre’s canvases as representing Dreaming stories forecloses questions that Aboriginal philosophies open in suggestive ways. Morphy has argued: “The concept of the Dreaming, a uniquely Aboriginal way of placing people in time and space, forces one to think differently, and in a less linear way, about the relationship between form and creativity in art” (1998:4).

Western understandings separate the subject from its objects, but Aboriginal Dreamings appear not to work like this. I say “appear” because I am acutely aware that, my thought having been given to me via the categories of Western life, I am unlikely ever to inhabit a world in which I am *not* separated from my objects by my thought. This is a condition of my Western subjectivity, and thereby of my ontology.

Nevertheless, I am familiar with objects that complicate this view, even in the Real World. The leading example would be my body, which (borrowing the sentiment from Valéry) belongs to me a little less than I belong to it. I can imagine the possibility of inhabiting the world differently when I experience the heat of a desert day, for example. Traveling in the outback, “going out to country,” involves a physical immersion that I cannot comprehend merely by viewing a map.

“Country” is a translation of an Aboriginal concept much larger than nature, land, or place. It is enriched with both archetypal and social meanings, and imbued also with the deep sense of belonging that knowledge



of the Dreamings conveys. Rosalyn Diprose writes of this Indigenous philosophy in terms of the closest Western analogue, contemporary work in the phenomenological tradition. Emphasizing the aspects of subjective perception that underscore our own knowledge (in this, drawing especially on the thought of Merleau-Ponty), she observes: “Where I see footprints in sand Kathleen Petyarre sees the mountain devil lizard, the mountain devil lizard Dreaming carving up the dirt and creating a world of meaning as it wanders through the land” (2006:33).

According to her authorised spokesperson, Christine Nicholls, Petyarre makes a direct correlation between her navigation of the landscape with her family through childhood, and her expression of the landscape of the Dreaming in painting [Diprose 2006: 38]. Nicholls suggests that the artistic expression of Petyarre’s spatial knowledge of the landscape is due to an “ability to reconstruct, from memory, detailed and accurate mental maps” of the terrain of her childhood [Nicholls and North 2001:7], so accurate that her canvasses of the landscape bear a remarkable resemblance to aerial photographs of the terrain [Ibid.].

The phenomenological understanding that Diprose details allows for another inflection. She suggests that Petyarre’s expression of the Dreaming is not a mental map, but rather a transformed echo of her bodily orientation toward, and expression of, country. “Through her inheritance of meaning of the Dreaming through dwelling with the elders and through her simultaneous bodily navigation of the land, Petyarre has herself become the mountain devil lizard dreaming.”

Through the concept of dreams, of course, I can capture a sense in which the world is experienced differently. Whitefellas dream, too, and some are troubled by their dreaming. Dream states are not commonly regarded as a kind of thought in Western culture. Yet a tradition of

valuing the insights of dreams can be found; in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud goes so far as to map the rhetoric of the dream as a meaningful but encrypted style of thought.

Perhaps the salient aspect of the psychoanalytic understanding of dreaming for appreciation of the Aboriginal Dreaming is the way in which the material world of objects and events is invested with meanings for the dreamer, as expressions of desires and fears. But there is no need to turn to psychology to find the deep intelligence of this reflection, since the artistic genres themselves carry that necessity. Dance and drama, music and architecture all require a different mode of interpretation from a literal text or a realistic image.

“Spencer and Gillen’s photographs of ceremonies in Central Australia show just how transforming the body art of Australia is, and how easy it is to imagine that the dancers are manifestations of the ancestral beings as they were when they emerged from the earth” (Morphy 1998:91). The character of these beings “is almost ineffable, grasped only for the moment. In their most concrete form they can be seen embodied in the form of the landscape and in the birth of a child, but the ancestor moves on and the child grows old and dies. They exist, in essence, as an idea, as a creative force that touches many different things and appears in many different manifestations, but which cannot be reduced to any one of them. It may be for this reason that ancestral beings are often portrayed not so much by figurative representations of objects that occur in the natural world as by more abstract geometric forms” (ibid.).

This seems to describe an *aesthetic*. The Dreaming emerges as an ordering of sensations and impressions into a scene that “makes sense.” It does so as a living practice.

As Jennifer Biddle points out, “even the most sympathetic accounts of Petyarre’s work, ... juxtapose canvasses of Petyarre’s with representations of the ‘real’: cartographic maps, ‘iconic’ translations; photographs of red country and mountain devils” (2006:61). While acknowledging the political salience of these cultural keys, Biddle argues that the effect of the “generic” Dreamings of Petyarre’s later work (and of other Utopia

artists such as Emily Kngwarreye) is to insist “on the productivity of painting itself as an autonomous materiality” (ibid.:63).

These works, she writes, “bring the Dreaming into being. Ancestral potency arises within these paintings and is actively produced by them. . . . This textuality does not point or defer. The energy emanating from these works is inescapably immediate. Viscerally-charged and haptically exuberant, Petyarre’s work is above all else, *affective*. These paintings incite and excite” (ibid.:64).

The challenge presented by the Dreaming is not one of a mysticism opposed to a social history. Writes Morphy: “The recent history of Aboriginal art has been a dialogue with colonial history” (1998:4).

As Morphy has said of the acrylic art: “The paintings missed out the stage of being primitive art altogether and became almost overnight part of Australian contemporary art” (ibid.:315). “Batik designs were part of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s heritage as much as the body designs that influenced her later paintings. Western Desert art . . . is a dialogue between the present and the past in the context of the ever widening world in which people live” (ibid.:316).

Aboriginal graphic displays are “embedded in ritual and ceremonial activities which are in many senses economic exchanges” (Michaels 1987:138). “Designs signify, among other things, rights; to songs; to myths; and to the land and its resources that they depict and celebrate.” Petyarre’s art is formed inside the European art scene, as much a product of it as of the Dreaming. The synthesis of Aboriginal Dreaming practices with European “economic realities” is the genius of Aboriginal acrylic art.

Petyarre is steeped in the law of Anankherre Dreaming, but lives sometimes in suburban Adelaide. Emily Kame Kngwarreye had a similarly traditional education, but became a modernist celebrity in her last years. They demonstrate this synthesis, by picking up the threads of the Dreaming law in the means offered desert communities for economic survival—batik painting, and later, painting with acrylics on canvas.

Kngwarreye’s and Petyarre’s paintings are precisely not “painting traditional Aboriginal designs,” but enact an aesthetic of the impossible



collision of Aboriginal and European worlds in the artists' time and place. These canvases are new Dreamings, sensations of contact with Western orderings that provide a rich artistic provocation in the work.

Desert painting generally represents the adaptation of Aboriginal culture to meet the Western world view: the transposition of sand and body painting from the ground of ceremony to the picture plane of canvas and acrylic paint. The Western Desert acrylic art became the first Aboriginal art to be recognized alongside other Australian art as a serious, contemporary event of style.

Its acceptance is partly due "to the art's remarkable similarities to modern Western abstract painting" (Sutton 1988:90). The ontology of signs is expressed in the art—"the Aboriginal artist generally seeks to create reductive *signs* for the things represented" (ibid.:37, author's emphasis)—which is thereby "conceptual" rather than "perceptual," as much writing as painting. In the iconography, the sacred meanings of the world can be both displayed and encrypted. The status of Aboriginal art as "an iconic religious form of landscape art" (ibid.:81) links it to a visual logic that Western eyes have been prepared for.

Questions of belief and truth are also meaningful for modern Western abstract art. But there are some ways in which the Desert paintings—the ontology of the Dreaming that it expresses—maintain a perplexing distance from the postmodern. This is shown, for example, in the deceptively simple exclamation made by Sutton's Aboriginal friend: "The land *is* a map!" he says (Sutton 1998:19).

The stories of the Dreamings are as close to law and theology as they are to the poetic; they express a deep epistemic relation to the land that in traditional life created both social structure and legal entitlements. The painted expression of Dreamings does not decorate, but rather mobilizes, a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world.

As Eric Michaels has written (specifically of the Yuendumu art), "These paintings make the claim that the landscape does speak and that it speaks directly to the initiated, and explains not only its own occurrence, but the order of the world" (1987:143).

There is something fortuitous in the Desert art “looking like” abstract art, “modern art,” at the same time as it arises under and gains its celebrity in the genre of “indigenous art,” which is precisely *not* modern, as far as the map of the artwork commodity goes. That fortuity tells us something important about the creation and reception of art, as it does about the creation and reception of political categories like “indigenous.”

It is fortuitous that this interest meets in Desert painting, whose works show the scars of Indigenous contact with European culture, at just that time when these two categories might be said to have *unsettled* each other. Not that the exchange was ever equal, but there was finally beginning to be an exchange, where there had previously been nothing but the imperious exercise of exclusion (art versus artifact, civilized versus “primitive” where “primitive” belongs to that Eurocentric discussion in which Western artists were measuring themselves, initiated versus uninitiated, art theory versus ethnography).

This fortuity is intensified by Kngwarreye, Petyarre, and others also entering into the category of “woman artist,” since that celebrity itself has unsettled the traditional categories of “the artist” and “artistic genius,” as it has confronted “traditional art” (Battersby 1989). An indigenous woman artist painting very large abstract canvases might be an important incongruity.

So, an indigenous art and a feminist politics, indigenous politics and feminist aesthetics, collide in the placement of this work and its viewers now. Moreover, these spheres collide *in the work itself*.

It might be held that the lack of figuration in their recent work has nothing to do with the moving beyond figuration that just happens to coincide with it in modern art. To understand this fortuity as more than a superficial—even cynical, albeit profitable—error of appreciation, one needs better to understand what it might mean to experience cross-cultural exchange and what it would be to appreciate a work of art.