

## Arts Publications

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# The dream of aboriginal art: the author reflects on the visual richness and symbolic complexity of an art form that has come to occupy a significant place in the history of modernism

## Art in America, April, 2007 by Richard Kalina

"Who's that bugger who paints like me?" asked Rover Thomas, one of Australia's greatest Aboriginal painters, when, in 1990, he first encountered Mark Rothko's 1957 #20 at the National Gallery of Australia. The question is a revealing inversion of the often Eurocentric view of Aboriginal art. Thomas, an artist from the Western Desert, painted seemingly simple, often blocky forms using a range of natural ochre pigments. Like Rothko's, his work is spare yet symbolic and emotionally resonant, and though he lived in a very remote area and came to art late in his life, he achieved great acclaim in a relatively short time. When he visited the National Gallery in Canberra, Thomas was on his way to Venice--it was to be the first time he would leave the country--to represent Australia in the Biennale. He was genuinely surprised to see a piece of modern Western art that seemed to be in synch with his own practice.

Thomas's Aboriginal-centric view of Western art makes sense, for Aboriginal art comprises a worldview every bit as complex (and contained) as ours. But what about the other side of the coin? What preconceptions do we bring to Aboriginal art? Unfortunately, all too often that art is diminished or patronized; viewed as a bastardized modernism, a marginally interesting branch of folk art or simply a subject for cultural anthropology. In fact, the week before I visited "Dreaming Their Way," a magnificent exhibition of art by 33 Aboriginal women, at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum in New Hampshire (it originated at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.), I mentioned my interest in Aboriginal art, and this show in particular, to a very senior American critic. He dismissed it all out of hand. I don't remember the exact words, but "third-rate lyrical abstraction" would certainly convey his judgment.

The best-known form of modern Aboriginal art, characterized by all-over dotting and associated with desert communities, didn't get started until 1971. That was when a non-Indigenous art teacher named Geoffrey Bardon began to encourage the men of Papunya, a small settlement about 100 miles from Alice Springs, in Central Australia, to channel their artistic energies and experience into painting murals on the local school walls using Aboriginal motifs. The final project was a 10-by-33-foot mural of the Honey Ant Dreaming, its form the result of complex negotiations between tribal elders and the painters. The mural was a great success, and soon the men were painting traditional stories and motifs on board and canvas. It should be noted

that Papunya was essentially a place of exile officially opened in 1961, its inhabitants trucked in by the government from the outlying deserts so that they might be "civilized."

The development of the Aboriginal art we know now thus grew from a decision by the elders to reassert, in circumstances of forced assimilation, an Aboriginal identity, especially for the younger generation. The story of the movement is long, complex and fraught, but complexity and mystery seem to go along with an art whose interpretation is rarely clear, at least for outsiders. The iconography of any particular painting can be very difficult to decode. Even a painting's facture may encapsulate mysteries: many people feel that the dotting technique has been used to overlay and hide secret information, a response possibly to what was deemed the overly accessible work of the early years. (In fact, a strong desire has been expressed by some senior artists and elders that certain early and important works currently in museums be removed from public display.)

Its complicated history has led some critics to judge Aboriginal painting even more harshly from a political point of view than a formal one. While sympathizing with the artists, some writers have seen the whole enterprise as flawed (and one-sided) from its very conception--a nexus of complicity, arrogance, insensitivity, greed and naivete. To these skeptics, the very idea that an outsider could even begin to approach Aboriginal art with anything other than cultural bias is absurd, yet another example of the arrogance of the powerful. As Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis wrote in this magazine, the "drift towards cultural pluralism (multiculturalism) can be seen not so much as enlightened accommodation of other world views but as a violent ripping of signs from the sites of their primary significance." (1) It can, to their way of thinking, only lead to cultural erasure: far better to encourage politically engaged activities, such as Aboriginal radio and television stations.

Certainly Aboriginal art has not gained all that much traction outside Australia (although the opening this past June of the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris, with its collection of Aboriginal art, might help). I was told by Brian Kennedy, director of the Hood, and formerly the director of the National Gallery of Australia, that "Dreaming Their Way" had been offered to 50 other museums in the United States. It was turned down by them all. (2)