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A SNUB FOR ABORIGINAL ART

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AUSTRALIA'S participation in overseas exhibitions and art fairs has always been fraught with insecurity. If a venture doesn't meet with instant, overwhelming success, policies are thrown into reverse gear and the accelerator applied. A perfect example is the contrast between Australia's 1990 contribution to the Venice Biennale - the regional vision of Aboriginal painters Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls - and our 1993 representative, the international-style art of Jenny Watson. Thomas and Nickolls may not have carried off any glittering prizes, but neither did they attract the widespread derision that greeted Watson's work.

The dilemma of whether to aim for regionalist integrity or internationalist sophistication has never ceased to perplex our policymakers. Allied to this is the question of whether to persevere with European activities, or direct all our attention towards South-East Asia. Everywhere, one hears grumbling about how Asian projects have come to completely dominate Australia Council funding priorities.

But perhaps the change of focus is more understandable in light of a recent letter from the selection committee of the Cologne Art Fair to the Melbourne dealer Gabrielle Pizzi, which shows, once again, just how hard it is for Australian art to find a foothold in Europe.

"After taking all aspects of your application into consideration," write Herr Pothof and Frau Schnitzius, "it was not possible to grant you selection for Art Cologne 1994 because you do not exhibit authentic Aboriginal art, as the '93 exhibition jury observed, but contemporary art by artists following in this tradition. As you know, or as you can see from the conditions of participation, folk art is not permitted at Art Cologne."

Pizzi has long been one of Australia's leading exhibitors of Aboriginal art. She has shown such work privately at the Venice Biennale, and collaborated with many important overseas exhibitions. Along with the Sydney gallery Roslyn Oxley9 and Tolarno Galleries of Melbourne, Pizzi took part in the 1993 Cologne Art Fair, receiving financial assistance from the Australia Council, which helped defray costs on a sliding scale. Pizzi was successful in selling works to leading European dealers, and claims to have made contacts with about 50 collectors, whom she hoped to see again this year. Continuity establishes confidence, so with unfamiliar work those who come to look one year may be expected to buy the next.

For the 1994 Cologne Art Fair, only Roslyn Oxley9 has been accepted. Tolarno Galleries was excluded on the grounds that its art is too similar to a lot of things already being shown - an infuriating and arbitrary reason, but not nearly so disturbing as the complete cultural incomprehension shown in the letter to Pizzi.

What is especially galling is that from April to June 1993, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Dusseldorf hosted the exhibition Aratjara: Art of the First Australians - the most comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art ever shown in Europe. During its time in Dusseldorf, Aratjara attracted large attendances and almost daily national press coverage. It went on to the Hayward Gallery in London and the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, where it met with similar success. At the end of its European tour the exhibition had been seen by more than 255,000 spectators.

The National Gallery of Victoria is listed in the catalogue as the only local venue, but negotiations with Melbourne have fallen through and the show will not be seen anywhere in Australia. This is a shame, because Aratjara, which I saw in London, was certainly the biggest and best Aboriginal art exhibition since the Australian break National Gallery's 1989 survey, *Windows on the Dreaming*.

Dusseldorf, which helped organise and finance Aratjara, is barely half-an-hour from Cologne. During the show, the Kunstsammlung undertook an extensive education program, including lectures and forums, free brochures and guided tours by gallery staff, exhibition organiser Bernhard Luthi and visiting Aboriginal curator Djon Mundine. No effort was spared in making Aboriginal art comprehensible as a living, growing entity, with roots stretching deep into the past.

However, as the letter to Gabrielle Pizzi demonstrates, the selection committee of Art Cologne have decided the only "authentic" Aboriginal art belongs to the distant past, perhaps painted on a rock somewhere in the desert. Leaving aside the suspicion that "folk art" is often far more interesting than the work of professionals, if one were to apply the same criteria to living German artists, the patronising, indeed racist assumptions behind these remarks could not be more obvious. Are all German artists who follow in the tradition of Romantic painting to be written off as amateur daubers hunting the tourist dollar? An exhibition soon to begin in London, called *The Romantic Tradition in German Art*, traces Romantic imagery from the symbolic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich to the work of contemporary superstars Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer.

It is axiomatic that all artists work within some form of tradition, even if it is that threadbare avant-garde tradition which sees art simply as an instrument with which to shock and disturb the by-now-unshockable bourgeoisie.

What the selection committee may be saying is that it does not want to waste precious space showing art from a small country on the other side of the world - especially art which looks strikingly different to the sleek, run-of-the-mill productions of contemporary Euro-fashion. It has made a business decision, responding to pressures close to home, and to a narrow, jaundiced model of "professionalism". Yet the way it has couched this letter amounts to nothing less than an international insult. It is not simply bad luck for one commercial gallery, but a snub of mammoth proportions for the Australian Government's modest attempts to make Australian art visible abroad. Above all, it raises the grossly offensive proposition that the only "authentic" Aboriginal artist is a dead one.

If anyone has doubts about the quality of the local "folk art", he or she should visit Hogarth Galleries, where there is a first-rate exhibition of bark paintings from

Maningrida, including works by artists such as England Bangala, James Iyuma, Les Midukaria and Paddy Fordham. In the room next door, one can see an extraordinary flower painting on canvas by Eunice Napangardi.

Part of the pleasure of such survey exhibitions is that it is relatively easy to distinguish the characteristics of each artist's personal style. The more pieces one sees by individual artists, the more inadequate it seems to lump these paintings together under one anthropological category.

There is a complexity and depth to these pictures that make most white Australian art look indecisive, rootless or stereotyped. Few artists anywhere can draw, in such an unforced way, upon an ongoing spiritual heritage, upon a shared set of values and beliefs. It feels almost unnecessary to have to point these things out, but the letter from Art Cologne shows the act of seeing is perhaps more a matter of cultural recognition than visual discovery.

One Aboriginal artist who has captured the imagination of the Australian public is Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the octogenarian painter from the Utopia community, who was recently awarded a fellowship by the Prime Minister. Kngwarreye has been praised so widely and lavishly that one feels an instinctive distrust of all the hype. With a painting career hardly six years old, Kngwarreye is undoubtedly a remarkable artist, but not so remarkable that she must be placed on a pedestal. The artist herself is reputed to be shy, and must inevitably be affected by all the hullabaloo.

Now, at the Utopia Art gallery, on that gruesome thoroughfare, Parramatta Road, one can sample Kngwarreye's *New Directions*. Hype or no hype, the title is an understatement: Kngwarreye's work has undergone a complete about-face. From those earlier, rather beautiful paintings with their layers of feather-soft dots and smudges, she has turned towards a spare, almost brutal style, with most pictures being little more than collections of horizontal or vertical lines on starkly primed canvas. The change of reference is from landscape to body painting, but most viewers will find it hard to get beyond the abstract directness of dark paintstrokes on a white ground. Some of these pieces are uncannily reminiscent of the late works of Tony Tuckson, who was in turn inspired by Aboriginal art.

On first impressions it's hard to form any conclusions about these works. They are less superficially attractive than the earlier paintings, and far less complex. If they retain a magnetism it is because their outrageous simplicity is the sort of thing many artists take a lifetime to achieve.

Kngwarreye is an elderly lady but a young artist, and the boldness of this new work is breathtaking. Even if her previous style may prove more enduring, these raw paintings will find many enthusiasts. In particular, *Untitled(Awelye)*, a loose grid of white lines on a brown background, has stayed in my mind ever since seeing the exhibition. It has echoes of Tuckson's paintings on masonite, but each stroke of the brush is so clearly defined, so tenuously balanced, that the eye lingers happily in every wonky rectangle. The dogged asymmetry of the work provides a perfect analogue for unpredictable, organic growth.