

Sun - June 8, 2008

## CONTEMPORARY (ABORIGINAL) ART, HISTORY, AND CRITICISM

In my post from a week ago ("[Art News on the Web](#)"), I noted with appreciation the return of Nicholas Rothwell to the art beat at *The Australian*. Since then, Rothwell has published two more significant pieces in that newspaper's pages. The *Weekend Australian* for May 31 contained a review of Colin and Elizabeth Laverty's new publication *Beyond Sacred: recent paintings from Australia's remote Aboriginal communities*. (Hardie Grant Books, 2008) entitled "[Ancient and Modern](#)." Then the *Australian Literary Review* for June 4 published a lengthy and important piece of meta-criticism, "[More Than Dreaming: bringing to light a blaze of beauty](#)." In this latter piece Rothwell extensively investigates the current status of critical writing about Aboriginal art. It's one of those pieces of writing that leaves me shaking my head and thinking, "I wish I'd said that."

The Lavertys' *Beyond Sacred* is an extraordinary book, the record of a collection assembled over two decades that includes some of the finest examples of Indigenous art from the Western Desert, the Kimberley, and the Top End, and Rothwell lauds the vision of the Lavertys in building and presenting their collection. He recognizes their genuine love for the art and the artists who produce it, the scrupulous collecting practices, their impeccable taste. But he laments the lack of insight that the book provides into the "instincts and desires" that propel this collecting, and offers a critique of the "intellectual agenda" that the Lavertys have opted to pursue in the essays that accompany the catalogue of their collection: "Our aim is to showcase some of the best pictures in our collection as great contemporary art." Rothwell demurs.

[T]o that end they offer up a raft of essays by familiar experts, buttressing this argument from several perspectives. ... The trouble is, this dog pack just won't hunt, and the Lavertys, by erecting their complex superstructure, succeed in blurring the exact qualities that *Beyond Sacred* -- with its selection of tradition-based works -- seeks to showcase.

Before I go any further, I must engage in "full disclosure."

I've admired the Lavertys' works on loan to public art galleries for nearly a decade. We first met in Broome in 2005, and I have visited with them briefly at the opening of *Dreaming Their Way* in Washington DC in 2006 and again at their home in Sydney a year ago. From the first hour, our friendship has been characterized by a shared delight in the vitality of the art we love, by spirited conversation and debate, and by respect.

In May of 2007, the Lavertys invited me to contribute an essay to *Beyond Sacred* in support of their thesis that great contemporary Aboriginal art is indeed great contemporary art, doing me the inexpressible honor of having my views placed side by side with those of Howard Morphy, Judith Ryan and Nick Waterlow in the first section of essays in the book. My copy of the book arrived in the mail only yesterday evening, and I have not yet had the chance to read the other essays; indeed, I've barely skimmed the 300 pages of extraordinary photographs of art, interspersed with Peter Eve's gorgeous and affecting landscapes and portraits.

Although I cannot speak for them, I do think we share at least a few perspectives on the nature and value of contemporary Indigenous art. In particular, I agree with their assessment of this art as great contemporary art, and this leaves me with a bone to pick with Mr Rothwell, for I feel that he has missed a point in his assessment of their intentions and achievement in publishing *Beyond Sacred*. Near the end of his review, he puts forth the following propositions.

The masterpieces of the Laverty collection may well be made within an evolving stream of art, and be contemporaneous in time frame, but in one key respect they are as far from the knowing, ironic contemporary as they could be: and it is precisely their difference that makes them so attractive and collectable.

...

The great indigenous work of the Centre, the Kimberley and Top End lies before our eyes: unreachable, irreducible, unknowable, by the great collectors, or by any other outsider. It stems from a closed, mysterious space, it speaks of ritual and beliefs communicated in concealed language; it has a core beyond its visible heart. This is the precise reverse of the contemporary. It is the thing of most cherished value in the indigenous domain: the secret Westerners want, and seek to buy, and cannot have. Such is the pull that draws the Lavertys on, and yet it goes almost unmentioned in the theoretical apparatus they have built like a castle around their raw desire.

In this assessment I think Rothwell does an injustice both to contemporary art in general and to contemporary Indigenous art in particular. There is a reductive logic to asserting that contemporary art is ironic and knowing, double-edged and self-conscious, while Aboriginal art succeeds because of its core of mystery and concealment. There is a truth to these statements, of course, but it is not the whole truth. And I think that the very point of the Lavertys' endeavor in *Beyond Sacred* is quite literally expressed in its title: it is an attempt to push art criticism beyond the consideration of the sacred and the mystical in Aboriginal art and to ask the reader to begin to consider those formal qualities it shares with contemporary non-Indigenous art.

As Rothwell himself put it in his review of the catalog for John Mawurndjul's retrospective, *Rarrk—John Mawurndjul: journey through time in Northern Australia* (Craftsman House, 2005), "Mawurndjul and his fellow masters of North Australian Aboriginal art are thus staking a claim to be regarded as artists without adjectives, contemporary painters who just happen to be from a particular cultural background" ("How the West was won over," *The Australian*, January 19, 2006).

It is true that some aspects of that "cultural background" are unique and may never be knowable to those who stand outside the tradition from which they develop. It is entirely appropriate that some of those concerns are not open to the scrutiny of Western eyes. However, there is much that can be appreciated, understood, and explicated. And this is the work of the art historian who must engage with the products of Indigenous artists and their traditions. To deny the art historian the opportunity to bring his intellectual framework to the conversation is tantamount to denying anthropologists access to the communities in which the art is produced. And to do so can be to condemn those communities to misunderstanding and prejudice, to mistake their difference for inferiority, and to fail to recognize the breadth of their achievements.

There is much that needs to be done to build an effective body of criticism and history around the work of the artists from remote communities in Australia. *Beyond Sacred* is a call to begin that work.

There is a need to document the history and diffusion of painting and its associated cultures throughout the continent. And, as Howard Morphy argues in *Becoming Art: exploring cross-cultural categories* (Berg, 2007), this is an endeavor in which art history and anthropology should cooperate, rather than being at odds with one another as they so often have been in the last century. The essays in Susan McCulloch's recent *The Heart of Everything: the art and artists of Mornington and Bentinck Islands* (McCulloch & McCulloch, 2008) suggest links between the Wellesley Islands and the Central Desert in both styles of dotted body painting and the songlines of the Dingo Dreaming. Similarly, the trade in pearl shell from the northwest coast around Broome through to the Centre suggests a common origin for the meander designs found in the works of artists as different as Aubrey Tiggan and Jacky Giles.

These connections, and more, need to be explored and documented. This will require that art historians cease thinking about "Aboriginal" art and begin to define the "schools" and "movements" in Indigenous painting and sculpture, the variety of styles, motivations, and desires that occupy the continent. The history of influence that such studies will generate must also take into account the influence of western aesthetic traditions on these Indigenous artists. To deny such an influence or to dismiss it as somehow corrupting of something essential is to

If this work has barely begun, it is in part because art historians, especially academic art historians, often have little motivation to do the work of art history in the Indigenous sphere. As long as the art retains the whiff of the ethnographic, they can leave such interpretation to their colleagues in the anthropology departments, who are however, much more interested (by and large) in investigating different questions. But even the traditional areas of anthropological research—questions of kinship, reciprocity, diffusion—can, to follow Morphy's suggestion, illuminate art history.

Without the work of art historians, Aboriginal art and culture will remain largely within the sphere of the ethnographic. I believe that one of the goals of *Beyond Sacred* is to try to place Aboriginal art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the frame of fine arts, to offer it a place within the discourses of art history so that the necessary and fundamental work of documenting influence, diffusion, tradition, and change can be done. Until that fundamental research is accomplished, we cannot begin to see where this art fits into broader historical movements. *Beyond Sacred* argues for the place of Indigenous painting and sculpture in the intellectual endeavor known as art history.

This is not to deny Rothwell's claim that the art "speaks of ritual and beliefs communicated in concealed language; it has a core beyond its visible heart" that generates considerable appeal. It is to release the art from the notion that such a core is its chief, even its only significant attraction. The formal qualities of the art are certainly what first drew me to it, at the *Dreamings* exhibition, which I saw at about the same time that the Lavertys, "already passionate collectors of contemporary abstract and figurative paintings, were swept away by what they saw" at Brisbane's World Expo in 1988. This vibrating visual presence (linked to those spiritual beliefs, to be sure) gives the paintings a structure that is susceptible to analysis in Western terms and without reference to the underlying belief system. It is time that such analysis begins in earnest, and we must be grateful to the Lavertys for issuing the call and providing such a rich resource for the undertaking by documenting their collection in this way.

But what of that "hidden core"? Let me turn aside from the particulars of *Beyond Sacred* for a moment to consider the question of the esoteric, if not the sacred, in contemporary art. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines *esoteric* as "designed for or appropriate to an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples; communicated or intelligible only to the initiated." Surely this definition encompasses the body of knowledge that underlies contemporary Indigenous art. But just as surely, it applies to certain aspects of Western art of the late twentieth century.

For an example, I want to reach back a bit in that history, to the great flowering of abstract art in America. This is the art that engaged me before I encountered *Dreamings*, and is akin to some of the works the Lavertys were collecting before 1988. I'm thinking of, for example, the great bronze veils and "Unfurled" paintings by Morris Louis, or the early black paintings of Frank Stella. Louis's veils communicate a sense of majesty, a concern with color, and precious little in the way of content or representation, yet they are admired by thousands of museum-goers around the world.

Very few people who see these paintings are probably aware of the "esoteric" agenda that lies behind their creation. That agenda reaches back to the achievements of the Abstract Expressionists, and their desire to liberate painting from the representational. Louis wanted to solve the problem in a different way; he wanted to get beyond the illusion of space that persists in the great canvases of Jackson Pollock: *Blue Poles* retains the specter of volume and depth despite the "overall" application of paint. Louis's solution was to attempt, in so far as possible, to obliterate the distinction between the surface (the paint) and the support (the canvas) and to do so by making the paint as thin as possible, so that it became absorbed in the weave of the canvas, one with it.

This concern with flatness, with an acknowledgment of the fundamentally, essentially two-dimensional nature of painting, found expression in countless works by other artists of the 1950s and 60s. Kenneth Noland's bull's-eyes and Jasper Johns's flags took "flat" objects as their subject matter; Warhol's silk-screened dollar bills gave the notion a different twist. Frank Stella, meanwhile, began to insist that the shape of the support should dictate the design it carried, and from the simple rectangle of the first black paintings, he progressed to ever more elaborate experiments with shaped canvases, moving from notching the corners to constructing enormous "running V's" and culminating in the experiments of the Irregular Polygons.

Art historians have laid out this intellectual agenda for those who are willing and able to be initiated into the academy of criticism. In the West, we have our own sequenced series of introductions to higher learning and revelations of esoteric knowledge that rely on a comprehensive understanding of the visual traditions and the thinking of artists engaged with exploring the rules that govern representation in that tradition. Without that education or initiation, one will not know what to make even of a large body of coherent work, such as could be seen in the recent retrospectives of artists like Brice Marden and Sol Lewitt.

Now this agenda is not going to be available to just anybody who walks into a museum or otherwise encounters the art. This abstruse theorizing is never going to be accessible to someone unless he passes through a series of initiations that go by the name of education in our society, initiations that are as stratified and long lasting and themselves result in social stratification not dissimilar to what happens in aboriginal societies.

On the other hand, access to sacred knowledge in aboriginal societies has its own kinds of restrictions and gateways. While Rothwell asserts that non-indigenous people can never see into the hidden core of the art, the same can be said of many within Aboriginal communities as well. To take a simplistic example, men and women are said to be excluded from one another's realms of knowledge, although the degree to which this is absolutely so is arguable and argued.

Similarly, knowledge of particular Dreamings and the rituals associated with them is not universally held. As Fred Myers details in *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, one gains rights to stories (and thus to painting those stories) through a variety of means. These are usually through association with particular country by place of conception or birth, or the place of conception, birth, or death of an ancestor or kinsman.

Myers also makes it clear that there is some room for negotiation in the area of access to land and its stories. In a society where all people stand in some kind of kinship relationship to one another one can, as Myers describes, argue for access to knowledge. Whether or not an individual is successful depends on many things—the eloquence of the argument, the political interests of those with more direct or stronger claims to the country, or indeed whether such owners still exist or are in danger of dying out. There is transfer of knowledge and country across affinal lines under certain circumstances where it is deemed important that the knowledge be transmitted to someone rather than being lost.

The point that I wish to make is that there are differences in degree as well as in kind in access to esoteric knowledge among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Would it be impossible for an Aboriginal artist to stand in awe of a great painting, even if he were ignorant of the Dreaming story and the associated ritual that it represents? Might he still not be able to judge the quality of its evocativeness, to intuit its power?

For those of us outside the tradition, a different form of initiation is required to further our appreciation of Indigenous art. Rothwell's brilliant essay in the recent issue of the *Australian Literary Review* praises the great and recent outpouring of critical writing in the realm of art history that promises to make Aboriginal art accessible to a broader audience and to deepen the comprehension of those for whom it is already a work of intellectual and emotional engagement.

Among the more fascinating insights he offers is the notion that four distinct strains of critical writing have become associated with four major, distinct areas of Indigenous style. A language of theory and social engagement dominates writing about artists who have grown up and been schooled within mainstream Australian society, the so-called "urban Aboriginal artists."

What Rothwell describes as "classical" art history, with an emphasis on history, thrives in the arena of Kimberley art, where a modern history of subjugation and massacre has repressed much traditional iconography and given birth to a genre that combines elements of the Western styles of landscape with a narrative approach to representation. The approach is useful today in chronicling the rise of new art centres: Rothwell cites Sally Butler's monograph *Our Way: contemporary Aboriginal art from Lockhart River*, but it is equally applicable to McCulloch's *The Heart of Everything* on the art of the Wellesley Islands.