

Tim Johnson: Painting Ideas

The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne

Opening event speech, Carrillo Gantner AO, Tuesday 10 November 2009

I can't recall another survey exhibition of an artist's work that conjures such a powerful sense of the artist's personal journey.

Perhaps because of the more recent works' rich Buddhist iconography, the metaphor of the Silk Road came to my mind: the vast journey across continents and cultures, the discovery of strange cities and peoples, the high mountains and inhospitable deserts, the lurid attractions of the *caravanserai* and the retreat into the lonely realms of spirituality, the days of rapid progress and changing scenery, and other days of plodding boredom.

'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is the labour.'
Robert Louis Stevenson 1881

As we are talking of an artist's journey, I suppose the image should not be the Silk Road so much as the Canvas Road.

There seems to be three kinds of journey happening here:

- The physical journey
- The spiritual journey
- The artistic journey

1. Physical Journey

Sydney, and Sydney University; Europe; Papunya and other Western Desert art communities; the Asian hippy 'hash trail' through India, Nepal & Japan; other travels? Back to Sydney.

So many paths and only one path

2. Spiritual Journey

Christianity; the Dreamtime; Buddhism; polytheism

So many gods and all one god

3. Artist's Journey: 'The Seven Ages of Man The Artist'

- Young painter abandoning painting for conceptual art and performance art in the late 60s/early 70s. Dissecting the nature of art and artworks. 'Anything can be art'. Questioning conventions and challenging traditional forms.

You see the visual diarist collecting and documenting fragments, pictures of the everyday and the ephemeral. The works exploring sexual boundaries which caused outrage in their day, to me now look quaint and almost tentative, titillating and titillated perhaps but cerebral and not letting go into the full libertine lust of real physical pleasures.

- Punk scene of mid to late 70s: music and graphics

Return to painting canvas through involvement in punk bands and flat colour fields. These works again reveal a visual diarist with grids of band posters and music groups like Radio Birdman and The Sex Pistols. Punk offered rebellion and confrontation. It was not pretty and neither are the paintings that document it. More like a fistful of fingers to the world.

- Western Desert: new aboriginal art first seen by Tim in 1977; first trip to Papunya 1980. Learnt a new way of painting from senior artists Tim Leura, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjari and Turkey Tolson. Change of style to the molecular surface of dots and a more fluid arrangement of spatial viewpoints. He learned to paint on the ground, and about the power of this art to invoke the land, the ancestors and epic journeys.

As well as painting collaborations he and his then wife began serious collecting and photographing artists and their artworks of their stories and land. You see these, and memories of these, in subsequent work.

– Buddhism: Began with travelling to Asia in '75–76. Interest in art, iconography and religious practice. Early 80s paintings inspired by Temples of Mogao near Dunhuang of great power and purity.

Introduced dot style from indigenous work. The mandala, central to Buddhist art, like the desert – the infinite, the emptiness that contains everything.

So many styles but one artist's journey

I think of Tim Johnson as the lone traveller, ignoring or rejecting the caravan, the company of the artistic crowd, giving himself up to the journey, letting go of control in the face of more potent traditions, embracing the unknown, filling the saddlebags of his unconscious imagination with memories of people and places, temples and art forms, fragments of experience and dreams. Like dreams there is a confusion of time and space, the personal and the universal, the particular and the general, vivid and blurred, now and never, now and forever.

In this mature integration of the Dreamtime and the Pure Land, the painting may have a thousand dots, a thousand narratives, a whole cosmos of icons and ideas, brief glimpses of gods, timeless like floating prayers, constrained by the formality of the canvas edge yet unconstrained by space, like space itself or chaos.

I note the meticulous care in the application of the dots in the later painting (look around this room). They are in circles, an endless clockwise journey, the concentration and formality. A meditation. As Robert Louis Stephenson noted, 'The true success is the labour'.

The exhibition title 'Painting ideas' seems to refer to Tim Johnson's return to painting canvases after his forays into conceptual art. But it is an inadequate title for this extraordinarily complex journey. It suggests one phase of development. It also suggests that the art is all conscious and controlled. It once was, but no longer.

My sense of the work, at least the later work, is that it has become unconscious, subliminal, meditative, 'in the moment', free, inner and irrational, with hand and brush an open channel for forces beyond the conscious mind, as in a dream space if not a dreamtime, or even The Dreamtime.

It seems to me that Tim Johnson is now achieving the freedom he sought but didn't achieve as a young man. The liberation of the early hippy culture and then the high achievement of the artists at Papunya and of the Tibetan school and their connections to ancient spiritual traditions, all finally come together. The dots have become the universal framework, the cosmic net, in which dwells the vast library of cultural sources and imaginings. These can be as literal and spectral as the painting of Lhasa's Potala Palace or as vague and cosmic as *Amnesty* or *From one cloth*.

The pictures of the aboriginal artists in the dreamscapes that bring the desert and temple into one togetherness are my favourite.

The painting of Clifford Possum is very special, with the artist in the centre of the work like a Buddha, floating in the mind's eye, evoking the spirit of the subject as much as his physical reality, remembered as in a dream.

My understanding, and it appears to be Tim Johnson's understanding, is that in indigenous culture, the image or action in a dream is as real and as potent, maybe more real and more potent, than what we call reality.

These pictures of the aboriginal artists in dreamscapes are by far my favourite works in this show. The artists have become Bodhisattvas, centred, floating, wise, pure and kind, offering the goal of salvation and enlightenment. It's a very radical view.

They also offer the continuity of the diarist – the sense of real people and place, the documentation of faces and of the art they have created. This art is quoted in other paintings – see *Illusory city*, a masterwork, with small boxes like windows onto another spiritual world, different but the same.

The paintings in partnership and the collaborative works were an early source of criticism and accusations of appropriation, but they are a true integration of style and a source of spiritual blessings, the artists firmly giving themselves, their spirit and their stories, to one another.

I have mentioned the artist as diarist along the journey. Can I also note the continuing theme that anything can be art. Here with the most recent work, the artist has filled his canvases with the imaginative souvenirs of life's journey. There is an extraordinary diversity of iconography in his 'carry all':

- Rock 'n' Roll images
- Egyptian bodies
- Indian miniatures
- Robotic figures
- Japanese temples
- Native Americans in horseback
- Cambodian statuary
- Indigenous handprints
- Lamas, sages and Buddhist deities
- Chinese Tang dynasty musicians with floating sleeves
- The Phoenix, elephant, flowers and trees
- Clouds in many forms

There is an unexpected clarity and confidence in the major images of Johnson's most recent work. Does this suggest increasing certainty about the journey's destination?

Let me conclude with the words of TS Elliot whose deep appreciation of life's journey is so beautifully expressed and apt for Tim Johnson:

'We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.'

And Tim Johnson's own words from his notes in 1974 that describe the same experience:

'If we walk backwards we reach the beginning.'

Thank you.

Carrillo Gantner AO
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