

REVIEW ESSAY:

A SHARED JOURNEY INTO VISUAL AND SENSUAL ABORIGINALITY

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PRELUDE

The erotics of writing for me have always been in the instant pleasure of putting pen to paper and discovering what is in my mind. The pleasures of having it read, on the other hand, are always delayed, sometimes by years. By then I have long gone somewhere else. What the erotics of editing are, I am not sure. The editing of unpublished documents, yes, I know the pleasure of that. My first book was an editing of a beachcomber's unpublished journal. It is a special sort of historical inquiry, following someone's else's lead, not shaping the questions. Through the years of my undergraduate teaching, I always insisted that my students experience that sort of challenge in their history-making. The editing of encyclopaedic knowledge, that is another thing. I can only admire the dedication, the negotiating skills, the patiences of such editing. I can be grateful for it too.

During my time of association with the Humanities Research Centre and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research there have been two monumental exercises in editing encyclopaedic knowledge: Iain McCalman's *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age. British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Sylvia Kleinert's and Margo Neale's

The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000). To me, they are both brilliant and masterful exercises in the editing art. They are both destined for immortality on library shelves. Any endorsement by me will not enhance their reputation. I am not competent to comment on Iain McCalman's *Romantic Age*, but I would like to have my say on *Aboriginal Art and Culture*.

Companion. I like the word. It has the feel of a shared journey, of fellowship in inquiry. Not encyclopaedic, not the totality of knowledge on a subject. Not even guide, not didactic. *Companion*. More pilgrimage in which attitude is as important as knowledge and expertise.

Companion. It is an offer to look with a shared perspective on a phenomenon that affects all our lives - how the first people of this continent have seen and now see the land and all the living in it. How they dance it, sing it, paint it, write it, know it, perform it, name it.

You will probably be humbled by this book, as I certainly have been. The humbling begins with the map of 'Aboriginal Australia' on the inside front cover. The continent's familiar template is there, made even more real these days because we can see it whole from satellites in space. But here, in this map, the

continent is different. It is imprinted with hundreds of names, first people's names, Aboriginal names – to be careful with our capitals. It is as if the continent has been overlaid with a transparency of Aboriginality. It is humbling for me, at least. I can scarcely pronounce the names without stumbling, let alone draw an 'Aboriginal Australia' map of my own with any of its true particularity.

The inside front cover map of 'Aboriginal Australia' is paired with an inside back cover of 'Australia. General Reference Map.' The imprinted names are far more familiar, of course. But the names are not as prominent in the map as the bare bones of the land, its deserts, mountains, rivers and plains. It is as if we look through the overlay skin of the continent to see the large and long-lasting characters that shape a large and long-lasting experience. It is a sort of inside/outside view of the land with which we will become familiar in the *Companion*.

For me, the 758 pages that separate the front and back cover maps are layered transparencies of visual and sensual Aboriginality. The transparencies are layered in time – from the millennia of rock art to recent gallery exhibitions and graffiti; layered in space – from Arnhem Land to southern prisons; layered in permanence – from stone carvings to body paint; layered in character – from film to poetry to political speeches to weaving to fashion parades; layered in experiences – from dreamings to lynchings to strikes to women's business.

I say 'layered', but the suggestion of the word is too static for the spirit in which this *Companion* is edited and written. That spirit is to be seen in the use of a keyword in the *Companion*. That keyword is 'Aboriginality'. Aboriginality isn't something to look back on.

Aboriginality is a living, dynamic thing, and the way to know it is to first accept that fact and then experience it. Aboriginality isn't layered. It permeates.

Words are empowering and disempowering. Surely the debates over 'political correctness' have convinced us of that. Finding a word that describes some wanted quality of identity that does not also import some unwanted quality is not easy. Refer to the discomfort, anger and political jokes about inclusive language in religion, politics, law and newspaper columns for that. Rejecting denigrating words – 'coon', 'nigger', 'abo' – is one thing. Adopting one – 'koori', 'black', 'blak', 'aborigine', 'Aboriginal' – is another.

Those hundreds of names on the front cover map, and the hundreds more not on it, those are the names that first people identify themselves with. Identity in their experience of Aboriginality is local. The biggest wound of the 'stolen generations' is always seen to have been the loss of local identity.

Capitalised, 'Aboriginal' is currently acceptable, even if you hear complaints about its grammar. Sensitivity to its use is culturally proper; just as it is culturally proper for me, whenever I lecture in Hawai'i, or New Zealand, or Vancouver, or Canberra on the matters of my professional concern – the encounter between settler society and Indigenous peoples – to acknowledge the original owners of the land on which I stand to lecture. That's life! No! That's living! It is addressing the deep issues of human understanding and will change the world. Not in a flash, but in a sort of cultural osmosis.

'Aboriginality' is a word of the same calibre. It is the recognition of a continued identity in the discontinuities of living,

an acceptance that people can see themselves as metaphorically the same in different spaces, a realisation that the external forms of culture can change but identity stays constant.

So 'Aboriginality' in the *Companion* is about how identity is processual. Powerful forces in society and law want to deny that. They want 'Aboriginality' to be frozen in time and place somewhere – in boomerangs, didgeridus and picaninnies. Powerful forces, especially in law, want a layered, static notion of identity and culture. It is easier to dispossess people that way.

The *Companion* sees it differently. This is no art history or coffee table book. It demands commitment to the humanistic ideal that understanding requires some entry into other people's metaphors about themselves. It demands acceptance of the fact that the ways of seeing and hearing these metaphors academically and socially have changed over the decades. The change academically has been from an intellectual puritanism in which the discourse about Indigenous art was determined by factors completely outside the cultural system in which the art was created into an experiential relationship between equals, built on the trust, respect and imagination of a shared humanity. Much of that experiential relationship is enabled by the meta-language of an anthropology which opens up the cultural system in both sides of the cross-cultural polarity between observer and observed to the same form of analysis. The observation is of artistry rather than art. The shared experience is of the actualities of living rather than its rhetoric. But the metalanguage of anthropology is also cumulative, dialectic and changing. The *Companion* is respectful of the depth of knowledge that source its under-

standings, from the antiquarians of a hundred and fifty years ago, such as Alfred Howitt, to the scholars of more recent times, such as Catherine and Ronald Berndt.

But the tone of the *Companion* is always one of listening to, and learning from, the artists. It is a hard thing to do.

I write *Companion*. I should be writing *Companions*. There are some ten thousand Indigenous artist companions in the estimate of the editors, Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, who form the context from which the several hundred dealt with in the volume come. One hundred and fifty authors write the conceptual essays, one hundred and thirty in number, that fill the first two thirds of the volume. Two hundred others contribute the informational pieces on individual biographies, artistic movements, and key events and institutions which form the last third.

Numbered among the nearly three hundred authors are scholars like Howard Morphy and Deborah Rose, leaders in the anthropological discourse on Aboriginal art, and Indigenous artists, like Kevin Gilbert, Fiona Foley and Destiny Deacon, who have turned the Aboriginal political discourse and the broader Australian cultural discourse in new directions.

Two things struck me about the list of authors. The one is that their voice comes not so much from the established institutions in the centres of population, as from the more marginal ones. It has been in the marginal arenas – geographic and academico-social – that Aboriginal voices have been heard, and more importantly, been listened to. These marginal arenas have gambled on the fact that Aboriginal students and staff have skills that have not been registered and certified

in the ordinary way, and they have won much understanding from their tolerance.

The other noticeable thing about the list is the entry into the discourse by people with new skills and different perspectives – curators, artists, consultants, freelance writers, musicologists, poets, playwrights. There is a freshness in their contribution that puts a new stamp on the *Companion*.

It is not for me to say how the *Companion* should be read. I followed the editors' suggestion that the two parts – the short essays on such subjects as the Foundation of Being, Colonial and Post-Colonial Scenes, Renegotiating Tradition, The Public Face of Aboriginality and the indexed information pieces from 'Abdulla Ian (Jo) William (1947) Ngar-rindjeri painter' to 'Yunupingu family, artists, musicians, and cultural ambassadors' – be read in conjunction. The editors' decision to release the essay writers from the obligation of giving much informational detail allows these authors to concentrate on concepts, clearly and succinctly. I felt obliged for the purpose of review to read the *Companion* page by page. Honesty and the notes I took tell me that I was pretty conscientious about that to about page 326, after 'doing' Literature. After that I dipped and moved forward and back between issues that attracted my attention – like Performance, Living Spaces, Aboriginalities. I suspect that is the way most people will read the *Companion*. Whatever way it is done, let me assure you that it is a learning experience. I would like to show how.

Howard Morphy writes a seminal piece on the '4th Dimension' in Aboriginal art. Maybe start reading there. Morphy has 'been there' among the Yolgnu of Arnhem Land for twenty years,

sharing triumphs and tragedies, knowing that Aboriginal art is a living thing. Follow the editors' suggestion and take the leads out of his article to Part Two – to Land rights and the understanding it gives of the eternal political dimension of Aboriginal art; to Dreaming and the complexity, contradictions, the shallow superficialities and the deep truths of this empowering element in Aboriginal culture; to Copyright and a realisation of how patronising – even colonising – is the idea that Aboriginal art is precious, primitive and simple.

Actually, you will learn even more if you follow the names of the four artists Morphy uses to exemplify his argument: Narritjin Maymuru (1918–81), Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932–), David Malangi (1927–99), Jimmy Midjaw-midjaw (1897–1985). These are artists whose works are now hung in galleries with the Gauguins, Picassos and Rembrandts of the world of art. These are artists whose diversity of styles, innovative techniques, and creative traditions are as worthy of a history and analysis and critique as our Boyds, Nolans and Williams. And as our cultural Reconciliation (look it up in Part Two) grows, these are artists who will play their role in our class rooms, lecture halls and political understandings.

Morphy's central theme will carry you through the whole volume. Aboriginal landscapes – on bark, in body paint, in sand sculptures on dancing grounds – are more about ideas and processes than appearances. They are displays of an 'inside' dimension that is generative of a relationship between land and living. Let us hope that they will be as generative hanging on gallery walls. 'Aboriginal art', Morphy writes, 'is part of a discourse in which the social and

spiritual meanings of landscape are revealed by moving the viewer beyond the surface form of things in order to understand the outside world from within' (p. 136).

Deborah Rose's piece on 'The Power of Place' will take you through the whole volume as well. She begins by quoting Anzac Munnganyi, a Bilinara man of the Northern Territory. 'White people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And put the flag; put the flag' (p. 40). His is a protest against *terra nullius*, not as illegal dispossession, but as dumb, blind ignorance. The whites couldn't see the country they put their flags into.

That 'country' – actually I was a little disappointed to find that the only reference to 'country' in Part Two is to Country and Western music! – is the Law and the Life that is in it. That 'country' is story, language, ancestry and every living species with its fourth dimension. That 'country' is land, intensified in its meanings by rituals and identified sacred spaces. That 'country' is gendered. To know it is to see the metaphors of gender in space worked out – east/west, male/female.

Read Margo Neale's 'United in the struggle: Indigenous art from urban areas' to get a sense of how these underlying themes of Aboriginal art have been re-negotiated. It will keep you busy as you trace the work of twenty-five Indigenous artists who exhibited in 'Koori Art '84' at Artspace in Surry Hills, Sydney. Here is Aboriginality worked out in a far different 'country'. The artists had a hard time. 'Hybrid, amateurish, not really authentic Aboriginal art, looking like second-rate European art', was the judgement from the establishment. Aboriginality in a changed metaphor is threatening.

There are many places in this volume, not just in Neale's piece, where we are confronted by events like an exhibition, or a work project that acts – to use Aristotle's word of the theatre – as catharsis for Aboriginal art. Outsiders as well as Indigenous people 'get the plot', see the meaning of what is happening in these almost ritual occasions. Certainly such occasions are transient, but the art is more long-lasting. So enjoy Lin Onus's Indigenised Hills Hoist with fruit bats hanging from it (p. 273). Remember the impact of Fiona Foley's 'The Lie of the Land' outside Melbourne Town Hall, a monument in stone to the exchange of land ownership between settlers and first people for blankets and flour (p. 277). Think of the lasting effect of the 200 memorial poles of the 'Aboriginal Memorial' which the Ramingining artists gave to the nation on its bicentenary – and all the symbols in site that have followed that gift (p. 38).

Neale's is a history of what she calls 'The Politics of Visibility', 'The Indigenisation of Australia', and 'The Art of Self-Definition'.

There is a section in Part Two that I would refer you to, Prison art. Sylvia Kleinert wrote it. In a sense, all Aboriginal art is prison art, at least in Aboriginal eyes. In 1788, Australia became the biggest prison in the world. Missions and stations must have seemed like prisons, too. We are well aware of the disproportionately large Aboriginal prison population in virtually every state and territory. Even that most famous of Indigenous painters, Albert Namatjira, was prisoner for a time. Prison experience of the injustice of the justice system, racial discrimination within and without institutions, removal from family, and drug addiction triggered all kinds of

representation – ‘Graduating from “Her Majesty’s Royal School of Arts” with honours’ is how Gordon Syron (1942–) puts it. Reflection, calling on memory and the care that counsellors, Koori heritage groups and other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists gave the prisoners, tapped the abilities of many. Leslie Griggs (1962–93), Jimmy Pike (c1940–), Ronald Bull (1943–1979) are some of their names. Ronald Bull’s mural is still to be found (or is it?) on the walls of the decommissioned Pentridge Prison.

Kevin Gilbert (1933–1993) ‘Wiradjuri painter, printmaker, sculptor, cartoonist, photographer, poet, writer, historian and activist’ is perhaps the most remarkable of these prison artists. Gilbert’s polyglot art is represented in the *Companion* by his speech at the opening of the Tent Embassy in Canberra, May 27 1992, the 25th anniversary of the referendum of 1967 (p. 98):

‘It’s twenty-five years since we Aboriginal people have had Australian citizenship imposed upon us, very much against the will of the Aboriginal People, for we have always been Australian Aborigines, not Aboriginal Australians.

We have never joined the company. We have never claimed citizenship of the oppressor, the people who invaded our country.

Twenty-five years after this citizenship which was supposed to give us some sort of rights and equality, we see that instead of lifting us to any sort of degree or place or right it has only given us the highest infant mortality rate, the highest number of Aboriginal people in prison, the highest mortality rate, the highest unemployment rate.

And after twenty-five years we still have Aboriginal children and people dying from lack of clean drinking water, lack of medication, lack of shelter.

We have still had twenty-five years of economic, political and medical human rights apartheid in Australia. And it hasn’t worked for Aboriginal People.

At the end of the twenty-five years, we have seen the Australian Government and the Australian people try to get off the hook of responsibility by saying, ten years down the track we’ll have Reconciliation.

And Reconciliation doesn’t promise us human rights, it doesn’t promise us our Sovereign rights, or the platform from which to negotiate, and it doesn’t promise us a viable land base, an economic base, a political base, or a base in which we can again heal our people, where we can carry out our cultural practices.

It is ten years more of death! There must be something better ...’