

translating | **worlds**  
*Is Petyarre's Work Abstract?*  
ROBYN FERRELL

There is something fortuitous in Kathleen Petyarre's work 'looking like' abstract art, 'modern art', at the same time as it arises under and gains its celebrity in the genre of 'Indigenous art', which is precisely *not* modern, as far as the map of the art commodity goes. In James Clifford's schema, the reception of art objects into a culture is defined by whether they contribute to self-image or as images of the other. The latter participate as 'artefacts' and belong to appropriation through the collection—under the sign 'to have'. Whereas 'art' works in the mode of the dominant culture's self-definition under the sign of 'to be'.<sup>1</sup> That fortuity tells us something important about the creation and reception of art, as it does about the creation and reception of political categories like 'Indigenous', 'feminist', and so on.

It is fortuitous that this interest meets in a painter like Petyarre, whose works bear the scars of Indigenous contact with European culture, at just that time when these two categories might be said to have *unsettled* each other. Not that the exchange was ever equal—but that there was finally beginning to be an exchange, where there had previously been nothing but the imperious exercise of exclusion (art versus artefact, civilised versus 'primitive', where 'primitive' belongs to that Eurocentric discussion in which western artists were measuring themselves, initiated versus uninitiated, art theory versus ethnography).

This fortuity is intensified by Petyarre also entering into the category of 'woman artist', since that celebrity itself has unsettled the traditional categories of 'the artist' and 'artistic genius', as it has confronted 'traditional art'. An Indigenous woman artist painting very large abstract canvasses might be an important incongruity.

So, an Indigenous art and a feminist politics, Indigenous politics and feminist aesthetics, collide in the placement of this work and its viewers. But this is not yet to say, that these spheres collide *in the work itself*. That will need more defending.

It might be held that the lack of figuration in Petyarre's work (and Aboriginal acrylic painting generally) has nothing to do with the moving beyond figuration, which just happens to coincide with it in modern art. To understand this fortuity as more than a superficial, even cynical, albeit profitable, error of appreciation, one needs better to understand what it might mean to experience cross-cultural exchange—which is to say, what is at stake in translation? what would it be to appreciate a work of art? what is the aesthetic? and how might one take the measure of chance in all this?

— WHAT IS AT STAKE IN TRANSLATION?

When I encounter a new image from another culture, I also approach it deeply immersed in my own cultural arrangements, which are also material potentialities and impossibilities. The task of appreciating the new work is first a translation, but one which is open to the aesthetic dimension. By that I mean it is open through the material to an event of experience.

Walter Benjamin writes, in his celebrated paper on 'The Task of the Translator': 'The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue'.<sup>2</sup> The powerful affect evokes the aesthetic as an opening onto the domain of truth-making, which innovation could only happen if we relax our already-organised understandings in favour of allowing something else to happen.

The metaphor of translation may be appropriate to cultural exchange, since language is very often the leading cultural artefact through which that exchange is initiated. Yet, we cannot assume what, through translation, we come to *understand*. The possibility of translation—what it transmits, what it omits—might well be theorised as structurally aporetic. The notion of a communication of a vibration, as against that of information, captures the limit of the textual metaphor, which can occlude more material notions. Being powerfully affected by the foreign tongue entails assuming that the material arrangements of language are integral to its ideas.

But translation already assumes a more or less stable set of meanings in the languages that encounter each other. Even an open-ended notion of translation is limited in this way. Benjamin requests that 'the translation must ... form itself according to the manner of meaning of the original, to make both recognisable as the broken parts of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel'.<sup>3</sup>

This postulates a greater language, a commonality of ideas and experience that goes beyond the material expression of the individual language. And in which both can be compared. The image of fragments of broken vessel is even more poignant as an image of one humanity in which the translation of experiences are possible. This 'greater language', the larger vessel,

is proposed as available in translation, to make it viable. But what is needed is an exploration of the likelihood of that greater language; the formations of those intelligibilities, in which the languages, before their translation, take shape. The textual metaphor is not completely equal to the task, when it functions only as a model of exchange. We may lose some communication of the aesthetic experience in the translation.

The appeal of the textual metaphor generally in recent philosophies, to describe the making of meaning, arises in the anguish of the postcolonial, in which intelligibility cannot be assumed but must be negotiated. The trope of language has extended to include not only a set of vocalisations which make up a natural language, but any arrangement of elements which taken together generate meaning—from written marks, to habits of dress and rules of kinship. The domain of the semiotic is thus much larger than the ‘ordinary language’ concept of language, designating a theoretical association between the production of meaning in language and the production of meaning in the social and conceptual domain. This is not strictly ‘mere metaphor’, but an association that grows out of a material process that underlies this production.

A study of intelligibility suggests that meaning is a product of power as much as of truth. Indeed, truth is its product rather than its referent. And power always acts on something material—a body, an arrangement of spaces, a deployment of time.

The *aesthetic* precedes the semiotic, in the sense that the aesthetic describes the arrangement of elements that bring out intelligibility as a material event. The aesthetic is that domain in which a formation emerges from any inchoate or disordered material. Its elements provide a challenge (Heidegger calls it ‘strife’, Deleuze and Guattari visualise it as vector forces on emergent planes), a challenge that assures there will always be innumerable possible meanings from a given set of elements. At the same time, their friction, as a product of their different qualities, will guarantee the specificity of each particular set.

The aesthetic composes material elements according to their character, at the same time as that aesthetic is composed by its materials, forming out of their peculiar resistances. In each case, the artist’s aesthetic is referred to a particular challenge of elements—material, pictorial, historical—which leaves its mark on the canvas. The possibility of new painting lies in these innumerable occasions for manufacture out of these elements.

This is not to say that this is what the artist saw, or meant, let alone struggled for. The deep irony of appreciation, as with translation, is that intelligibility is produced *for another*, out of an arrangement of materials. Who can say what composition of concept and colour, guilt and avarice, ignite the canvasses of the ‘Indigenous other’ for the European eye? Who is to say, or gainsay, what elements an artist, with what unconscious or deliberative genius, will be able to force into play of the social material at her disposal, on the canvas that she then presents to the appreciative eye?

So, what is happening in translation to the *difference* between one language or culture and another? Especially, where one language dominates the other, how faithful is the translation—and to *whom* is it faithful—to the culture it translates, or to the one it translates for?

Jennifer Biddle has raised these questions of translation in relation to a very pointed example, that of the central desert art of *Yuendumu Doors*, in her paper 'Dot Circle Difference'.<sup>4</sup> The central desert painting, which appears so attractive to the European eye, emerged out of a history in which Aboriginal markings were reclassified in the 1970s from artefact to art and bound to the political demand for the recognition of 'Native title' to land.

The 'stories' of the Dreamings are as close to law and theology, as they are to the poetic; they express a deep epistemic relation to the land which in traditional life created both social structure and legal entitlements. The painted expression of Dreamings did not decorate, but rather mobilised, a realm of intelligibility that produced the Aboriginal world. As Eric Michaels has written (specifically of the Yuendumu art), 'These paintings make the claim that the landscape does speak and that it speaks directly to the initiated, and explains not only its own occurrence, but the order of the world'.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere I have argued for the translation of Aboriginal art practices as law, raising the epistemological question of ordering beyond the specifics of a legal code and jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup> Petyarre's canvasses are presented as law/lore too, but perhaps as the new lore of contact with the European orderings which provide an artistic 'crisis' of particular richness in her work.

The translation of the Dreamings from the sand and the body to the picture plane has metaphysical consequences for the art and the law. For the picture plane reveals the art—law as *abstract*. Where it may have been lived, imbibed, through the treading out of the ground in ceremony or wedded to the skin, on canvas it can be visualised and hence, scrutinised. Perhaps the epistemological catastrophe starts here; the virtual is opened, law is represented as an abstraction and suddenly the prospect of simulacrum, the possibility of title simultaneously in its dispossession, is raised.

Meanwhile, the preoccupation in Western contemporary art with itself grows out of the metaphysical consequences of a loss of meaning. It is hard not to ally this with the narcissism of a colonialism, which by the middle of the twentieth century was coming under pressure.

New York in the 1940s: Claude Lévi-Strauss wandered, among other émigrés, in a city through which treasures of every culture flowed. The meeting of 'primitive' and modern inspired Lévi-Strauss to reflect on what was common to all culture—ethnography steps out onto philosophical ground. When Lévi-Strauss wrote of the structures of kinship or myth, he sampled anthropological observations from cultures as diverse as the north American Indian and the Papua New Guinean tribes. But it was all observed from the same perspective—a white European perspective that it took its right to view so much for granted that it even imagined it was 'objective' in its assessments.

Lévi-Strauss was not the only European to have found in New York a window, or at least, a peephole, on what has become known as 'the ethnographic other'. Ironically, he was fleeing Europe at a significant time in the history of racial intolerance. Another émigré in this New York 'chronotope' was Mark Rothko, born in Russia. The abstract expressionists were familiar with the indigenous art available to New York buyers at that time. They, like other European artists, saw aesthetic value in it and admired it by emulating it. But the difference between what they were doing with these motifs and what earlier artists had done with it, as they saw it, was immense. Whereas styles and figures were adopted to decorative effect by many artists, the abstract expressionists imagined *they painted from the same place*—that they respected, and moreover shared, the spiritual mission of the Indigenous artist. In a manifesto, Gottlieb and Rothko declare, against a formal notion of abstraction, that 'the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.'<sup>7</sup>

Is the art—law of *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming* 'tragic and timeless', according to Rothko's imagined affinity with it? Or is it, on the contrary, *free* of the transcendental—having been an event that occurs utterly in time and space, in perpetuity, as familial, economically, without irony, even in its forced encounter with the picture plane? Is this claim to 'spiritual kinship' merely a western avarice-nostalgia, complete with Jungian warrant to raid a collective unconscious and assume title to *every* culture?

I doubt Aboriginal artists would corroborate such a claim to kinship, when they lay claim to title as knowledge of law, proven by the ability of the initiated to paint it. Painting is a claim, but its entitlement is an effect of embodiment, not of appropriation.

According to John Lechte's account of Rothko's abstraction,

In the viewing of his paintings, Rothko insisted on two things: (1) that they were not exercises in the use of colour, and so did not refer to themselves; they were not abstract in this sense, and (2) they were not simply communicating a spiritual message—they were not self-expressive.

... the finite and the series evoke the author of the works. Instead of a painting before us, the notion of a finite series says that 'this is, above all, a Rothko'.<sup>8</sup>

Lechte argues it is the irreversible elements, those which could never be repeated, that permeate each work of the later Rothko: 'It is not just that each work is different, for what artist does not paint individual works? Rather, Rothko paints difference ...'; 'Rothko's works bring uniqueness into the light through magnifying chance, contingency and irreversible time'.<sup>9</sup>

The rhythm of Petyarre's *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming* canvasses might be said to raise repetition in the same way. Each canvas, repeating the lawlike, nevertheless instigates a difference with each subtlety of colour and line. This is expressive of the work of *Dreaming*, the ontological craft given to the law in traditional Aboriginal life. It is *more* expressive of the

ambiguity of repetition than Rothko's series by Lechte's argument, which is unable to unite the instances in the series except through the seemingly arbitrary geometric similarity.

Lechte says of Rothko that painting 'difference' in this way allows him to 'put his very being into question', which is to say, that the material event of each canvas challenges the relevance of the 'artist' as a unifying figure behind the repetitions.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the author is not absent from the series, annulled by the uniqueness of each material instance, but rather is 'occulted' by the ambivalence of the series, which evokes the law while it also fills the senses with the plenitude of the present.

— WHAT IS THE MEASURE OF CHANCE IN THIS?

It seems to me that the canvasses of *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming* exhibit general qualities of the 'abstract' artist's condition of work, following an understanding of abstraction that draws on a whole branch of an aesthetic arboretum, from Merleau-Ponty to Lichtenberg Eittinger. The encounter with the painting space provokes a particular crisis of representation (the diagram), which the resulting art resolves not in the manner of a solution but in the manner of the vector, rendering the compromise of forces and at the same time in the failure of their representation. It leaves a trace.

This encounter may arise autobiographically for the artist, in as much as it is not possible to initiate the encounter without it testifying to a deep schism of subjectivity which it entails—this might otherwise be described as the 'unconscious' element. Nevertheless, this does not make it 'psychological', despite the fact that its intensity is usually perceived through the figure of the artist, as their law, their history, their Dreaming. The scarring is the law in a Lacanian sense; the establishing of the subject through its demarcation in the sign.

This law gives the lead to its translation, and indeed it is its translation, since the whole effect of the law is to represent an order. But the art communicates, not biographical information, but aesthetic contours comprehensible for others. And what is comprehended is the *sensibility* of a certain possible ordering.

I think, far from isolating her work from these characteristics of the postmodern artwork, these qualities in Petyarre's paintings are paradoxically intensified by our recognition of her as an Indigenous painter—that is, for the proximity of her painting to the sacred and ancestral; as proper to the initiated only, as arcane; as embodying a knowledge of place; in short, as law.

Abstraction in twentieth-century art theory develops a grandiloquent narrative about the end of art, which ends in adopting abstraction as the metaphor for intelligibility and the crisis of meaning. But these modernist views of abstraction have given way to models of post-modernism, repudiating the fear that abstraction is the fate of painting.

John Rachjman refers us to Deleuze's 'logic of sensation', in which abstraction emerges as a possibility that must be 'rethought along several lines at once.'

The gross exclusive opposition between figurative and abstract loses its centrality, and a good deal of its interest, in favour of kinds of pictorial space, and the kinds of figurability they permit. For images or figures are not created out of nothing to match with external models; they 'come into being' from a compositional space which always departs from visual coordinates, creating strange new sensations. Abstraction is thus not in the first instance to be understood as the emptying of illusionist space of figures and stories; it is, rather, a sort of 'sensation' of this other larger sort of abstract space which precedes and exceeds it.<sup>11</sup>

This seems to fit the case of Petyarre's work particularly well. To understand her as abstract in this sense would be to understand her to be initiating the meeting of European and Aboriginal as a kind of painting in a pictorial space which resuscitates figurability from that crisis which could be said to be unrepresentable, irresolvable. The crisis is literally that of a 'conflict of laws': Aboriginal law in contest with European law, which has subjugated but not annihilated it.

Both Lechte and Rachjman argue that chance is the very essence of the abstract. It is also the motor of the outside of *any* system, political, gendered, artistic or theoretical. A logic is exhibited, therefore, in the fortuity of Petyarre's painting. It is a coincidence occurring in 'irreversible time', that is, *chance originating not as probability but as irrevocability*. The 'chance' effects of Petyarre's individual canvasses—effects which are not by any means accidental, nor are they accomplished by chance, in that they require a high degree of technical control to execute—these chance effects speak directly to the process by which Indigenous life has been irrevocably altered through the violent encounter with European life. Perhaps they *sing* of this, a triumph of new lyricism for the *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, a lyric of acrylic paint and Belgian linen.

The abstract seeks the outside, and the aesthetic strives to render the outside, in an order of representation which is inevitably resistant to it. Quite simply because it is an ordering, which is to say a domain of intelligibility, the invention of the aesthetic is obliged to breach it, in order to innovate.

This seems like a longwinded and highly esoteric way to announce something so simple that it has already been accomplished in Petyarre's commercial and critical success. I am shamed by the directness of the art in comparison to the blunt instrument of critique. But of course theory has its own aesthetic, and produces its own crisis and *Dreaming*, producing another intelligibility out of an entirely different collision of materials. No translation is ever solely 'about' the work it purports to translate, but rather it makes of the work an element in its own material.

Rachjman notes that for Deleuze 'philosophy itself becomes a practice of this abstract mixing and rearranging ... To transform the picture of what is to think abstractly is to transform the picture of the relations abstract thought may have with the arts.'<sup>12</sup> So, the question

of abstraction itself raises a touch-point for the thought of philosophy and art, like that raised by the Indigenous and feminist for the thought of politics and art.

The surfacing of the abstract on Indigenous canvas may therefore be no matter of chance. But it may be, in Rachjman's words, '... Abstraction as the attempt to show—in thought as in art, in sensation as in concept—the odd multiple unpredictable potential in the midst of things, of other new things, other new mixtures'.<sup>13</sup>

---

ROBYN FERRELL teaches at the University of Melbourne. She is the author of several books including *The Real Desire* (Indra, Melbourne, 2004), *Genres of Philosophy* (Ashgate, Basingstoke, 2002) and *Copula: Sexual Technologies, Reproductive Powers* (SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 2006).

- 
1. James Clifford, 'On Collecting Art and Culture', in *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
  2. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Selected Writings 1913–1926*, Marius Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds), vol. 1, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 257–61.
  3. *ibid.*
  4. In Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell (eds), *Cartographies: Post Structuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1991.
  5. Eric Michaels, 'Western Desert Sandpainting and Post-modernism' in *Kuruwarrri: Yuendumu Doors*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1987, pp. 138–42.
  6. Robyn Ferrell, 'Untitled: Art as Law', *Studies in Practical Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2003, pp. 38–52.
  7. In Mark Rothko, Tate Gallery catalogue 1987, pp. 77–8.
  8. John Lechte, 'Thinking the Reality of Abstraction', *Abstraction: A Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, no. 5, 1995, p. 33.
  9. Lechte, p. 34.
  10. *Ibid.*
  11. John Rachjman, 'Another View of Abstraction', *Abstraction*, no. 5, 1995, p. 21.
  12. Rachjman, p. 16.
  13. Rachjman, p. 23.