

An essay on the works of Western Desert women artists and Aboriginal culture

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The works of Western Desert women artists, such as Kathleen Petyarre, confront the viewer with the embodied reality of Aboriginal culture. These works are intercultural expressions of Aboriginal ways of being, imprinted within the frame of the canvas. This essay explores the implications of Kathleen Petyarre's paintings for Settler Australians, and the potential for such works to create a greater appreciation of Country. I suggest that the acrylic paintings performed by Western Desert women artists can be understood as both expressions of the Dreaming and as evocations of sensibilities to be experienced and felt by Settler viewers. With reference to Jennifer Biddle's *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience* (2007), I maintain that the work of Western Desert women artists departs from the dominant modes of representing Country, Dreaming narratives and Ancestors – instead articulating bodily experiences and expressions particular to Aboriginal women's ways of being in and knowing the world.

It is necessary to briefly examine the construction of Settler identity in colonial discourse to elucidate the context in which the Settler identity encounters Western Desert paintings. Settler Australian identity has been constructed through Settler narratives of 'self' that rely on the assumption of fixed identities. As is suggested by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha in *The Other Question* (1982), subjects in colonial discourse are typically formed through the concepts of fixity and difference. The construction of Settler identity relies on the assumption that there is an 'original' or 'pure' identity, which has a rigid boundary. Any identities that are considered as outside this fixed boundary are categorised as 'other'. For example, Aboriginal identity is categorised in terms of its difference to the normalised Settler Australian identity and subsequently constructed as 'other'. Dominant conceptions of Settler identity postulate the primacy of the Settler subject position; however, this position is reliant on the assumed stability of the Settler and Aboriginal identities (Bhabha 1982).

Entwined in dominant constructions of Settler identity are understandings of the self's relation to place. Settler conceptions of place are derived from the Western philosophical

tradition and the Settler legal system, which posit that land is essentially a form of property that is acquired by individuals who have the economic means and power to occupy the land. Settler conceptions of place tend to deny the intrinsic value and spiritual significance of land, asserting that its value resides in its instrumentality for humans (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984). It is through the repetition of images and discourse that fixed concepts of Settler and Aboriginal identity and relations to place are reinforced. This is evident in the modes of representation found in early Settler Australian landscape paintings, which repeatedly locate Settler Australians in dominant foreground positions and either relegate the Indigenous presence to the status of background object or erase it completely, in order to emphasise Settler propriety and dominion over the land (Muecke 2004).

However, as postcolonial theorist Iain Chambers point out, contrary to the assumptions of colonial discourse, identity is not static; rather, it is articulated as a response to the 'now', in which changing historical, cultural and sociopolitical conditions manifest in 'temporal configurations on the body' (Chambers 2003 p. 271). This suggests that

there can be no such thing as a fixed, unchanging identity or conceptions of place. Instead, the self is formed through a rich network of social, cultural, geographical and historical circumstances. As such, Settler conceptions of self and place – in debt to the legacy of colonial dispossession and subjugation of Aboriginal culture – become destabilised by the articulation of Aboriginal ways of being embodied in Western Desert paintings. These paintings subject the Settler self to an interrogative presence, which has the potential to disrupt Settler narratives of self and place. Kathleen Petyarre's paintings are an example of this disruption; they dislocate the assumed primacy and normalcy of Settler images and conceptions of place.

The self-protective monologue contained within Settler images that communicate and depict the Settler relations to place is captured aptly by this statement from Paddy Roe in the collaborative work with Stephen Muecke and Krim Benterrak, *Reading the Country*:

'You people try and dig a little bit more deep –
you bin digging only white soil –

try and find the black soil inside...'(1984, p. 193).

Roe's statement implies the need for dialogue between Settler and Aboriginal ways of being and knowing, to problematise the centrism of colonial discourse. Such a space creates possibilities for interrogating and reconfiguring the technologies, languages and understandings of the hegemonic centre (Chambers 2003). These languages and technologies can be appropriated and rearticulated to give new meaning to Aboriginal and Settler understandings of place and create a greater appreciation of Country.

Such is the case in Western Desert painting. Western Desert women artists have appropriated acrylic paints, canvas, the art market and galleries, fracturing the illusions of Settler identity and relations to place. The paintings produced by these artists are a creative and economical way to engage with and use Settler technologies and concepts to maintain Aboriginal cultural continuity and subvert the meanings of Settler culture. Settler Australians are confronted simultaneously with works that demonstrate the fluidity of Aboriginal cultural production and the inalienable connection to Country embodied in

these works (Moreton-Robinson 86). These paintings force 'a juxtaposition of forms', a crossing of thresholds, from where new and multiple meanings emerge (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p. 171). Thus, what is provoked by the work of artists such as Kathleen Petyarre is an interruption to the dominant ways of thinking and being, urging Settler Australians to re-interpret their relations to place. The Settler self is forced to simultaneously recognise its ontological limits, while being confronted with the possibilities of what exists beyond its inherited confines.

The paintings produced by Kathleen Petyarre elude standard Western systems of art categorisation. These seemingly abstract paintings are visually appealing to a modernist sensibility, which is accustomed to a lack of figuration and large canvases. However, to describe Western Desert paintings as 'modernist' risks misrepresenting Aboriginal culture (Berryman 2012). Ann-Marie Willis and Tony Fry suggest, in *Ethnocentrism, Art, and the Culture of Domination* (1988), that to label paintings produced in Aboriginal culture as 'art' is to understand them only insofar as they are commensurable to Western culture, art commoditisation, and linguistic frameworks of

naming – ‘it is not to understand them on their own terms’ (Willis & Fry 1988, p. 17). However, without the language or conceptual framework capable of comprehending the inalienable connection to Country and Dreaming embodied in these paintings, how does the Settler viewer make sense of and appreciate the meaning expressed in these paintings (Berryman 2012)?

The starting point for the Settler viewer is to acknowledge that the paintings by Western Desert women artists are an innovative and provocative way of transforming traditional modes of production, such as body painting and ceremony, into the medium of canvas, which is intelligible and accessible to the Western viewer. These paintings are consciously produced as intercultural works. In the words of Western Desert artist Billy Stockman, these paintings are made to ‘preserve traditions and also share with the outside world’ (qtd. in Leslie 2006, p. 100).

Western Desert women’s paintings are not about depicting the alterity of Aboriginal ways of being; rather, they are complex and evocative responses to the changed circumstances of Aboriginal being in Settler Australia (Chambers 2003). The reason Settler

Australians encounter these paintings is because they have been framed within the constraints of the canvas and entered into the ‘art world’ of galleries, art history, art trading and so on. These works are responsive and intrinsic to modernity itself, crossing the imagined divide between Settler and Aboriginal culture. They emerge from precise cultural, geographical and historical circumstances within modernity, presenting the viewer not only with a culturally distinct way of knowing and being, but also with ‘a sensory form to be experienced’ (Myers 2004, p. 5).

However, these paintings retain, for the artists and the initiated viewer, a substratum of sacred meaning, which they evoke rather than disclose (Nicholls 2001). Thus, the paintings of Kathleen Petyarre belong to multiple categories, opening up Aboriginal contemporary art to broader possible meanings. Kathleen Petyarre negotiates the different cultural and artistic criterion of Anmatyerr and Western culture. She states in conversation with Christine Nicholls:

‘I’m not allowed to paint other [Anmatyerr] people’s Dreaming either – I’ve just got to do my own

Dreaming. Otherwise big trouble our Law says’,

I wanted to be famous artist... So I really tried hard to do painting the way whitefellas like it – they like neat one’.

(quoted in Nicholls 2001, p. 30)

The intercultural nature of Kathleen Petyarre’s work is evident in the painting *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming Sandhill Country (After Hailstorm)* (1999). Kathleen Petyarre makes a distinctive move away from the use of icon figuration to a form that represents no perceivable icons or symbols of the Dreaming (Biddle 2007). She spends many hours in canvas preparation, applying layers of different coloured gesso in a way that allows each layer to be absorbed into the canvas. These varying layers create an immersive, three-dimensional surface, which produces a palimpsest-like depth to the work (Nicholls 2001). Kathleen Petyarre uses wooden skewers to swathe the canvas with a matrix of fine dots that emphasise the textuality and movement within the visual field. She is careful not to depict or suggest any icons, maps or stories that may direct the non-Anmatyerr/Alyawarr to *Arnkerrth* (Petyarre’s Dreaming ancestor). Instead, the performative act of painting brings

the Dreaming into being. In this sense, the Dreaming is rendered more powerful as it has to be felt by the viewer rather than seen (Nicholls 2001, p. 31). This work cannot be reduced to a single interpretation or explanation that fits within the confines of Settler language and conceptual structures. In a gallery, it may be read by the uninitiated viewer as abstract expressionism, even postmodern, or a map of Country. In its culturally specific context, other Anmatyerr/Alyawarr may read it as sacred art of the Dreaming (Nicholls 2001).

In her book *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience* (2007), Jennifer Biddle contends that contrary to the dominant interpretations of Western Desert art as maps of landscape and Country, or iconic representations of the sacred and the Dreaming, Western Desert women artist’s designs arise directly from marks that are made on the body, in a women-only Dreaming ceremony – *awelye* in Anmatyerr/Alawarr and *yawulyu* in Warlpiri. These corporeal marks are called *kuruwarri* in Warlpiri – *kuruwarri* is ‘a complex term that means mark, trace, ancestral essence, birthmark and/or freckle’. *Kuruwarri* are marks originating from the ‘time’ of the Dreaming, when they were made by Ancestors as they

roamed Warlpiri Country 'creating the landscape, flora, fauna, weather and people as they are today' (Biddle 2007, p. 56). Before the *kuruwarri* are inscribed on the body using ochre, the skin is first rendered receptive to the imprints with coatings of oil that are applied layer after layer by hand. This act is called *maparni* in Warlpiri, which means 'to anoint' (Biddle 2007, p. 61). Once the surface of the skin is 'anointed', the ceremonial markings are imprinted on the breasts and upper bodies of the women. *Kuruwarri* are both material and visual, which is to say that they are felt as they are seen – they imbue the subject with 'Ancestral life force, as well as creating bodily links between people and Country' (Biddle 2007, p. 60). Dreaming and Country are enlivened through the body, which is both imprinted with traces of Country and imprinting traces of Country – as the same inscriptions made by Ancestors on Country are enacted through the performance of *yawulyu/awelye*.

This same corporeal imprinting is also apparent in the techniques used to mark the canvas in the paintings by Western Desert women artists. The process of painting is not a simple transferal of the bodily markings into the frame of the canvas. Instead, the canvas is made

skin-like: just as the skin is readied for painting with the act of *manparni*, the canvas too is readied with gesso, before the imprinting of the bodily traces of Ancestors takes place – like the skin, the painting becomes a living embodiment of Dreaming and Country (Biddle 2007). Such techniques deny any ultimate differentiation of body from canvas, Ancestral imprint from Country or Country from canvas. Hence, the potency of these markings when imprinted on the skin or in the frame of the canvas – the canvas becomes a living text or trace of Dreaming that is felt as it is seen. Thus, the power of Kathleen Petyarre's work (and Western Desert women artists in general) is not its symbolic representation of the Dreaming, but its ability to bring Country into the present as a lived bodily experience and response (Biddle 2007).

In Kathleen Petyarre's work *Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (Watercourses & Rockholes)* (1999), there is flatness that refuses perspective, disrupting the usual subject-object relation between the viewer and the image. This displaces the privileged position of the viewing subject and produces an intersubjective encounter. *Thorny Devil Lizard Dreaming (Watercourses & Rockholes)* traverses the

imagined divide between the viewer and image, stimulating a bodily response. The effect is to merge the viewing subject not only with the canvas, but with Country itself (Biddle 2007).

Kathleen Petyarre's layers of luminous coloured dots create a texture that sets the visual field vibrating. The pulsating rhythm created by the layers of dots goes beyond visual effect as it radiates the force of the Dreaming and Country in time with the heartbeat of the viewer. It is this rhythm that connects the material presence of the painting with Dreaming and Country, and Dreaming and Country with the beat of the body (Bolt 2006). The pulsating of the visual field invites the viewer to feel the Dreaming and Country, as the painting does not simply represent Dreaming and Country – 'the paintings and the Dreaming are one and the same thing' (Bolt 2006, p. 62). Thus, to experience and appreciate the paintings of Western Desert women artists is to experience and appreciate Country.

Kathleen Petyarre's work requires a response that breaches the normative language that pertains to explain it (Chambers 2003). The intercultural act of viewing her work renders to the visual what is otherwise untranslatable in the confines of the language and conceptual

frameworks of Settler culture (Biddle 2007). These paintings enliven Country, inviting the viewer to experience a sensory manifestation of Country. They leave a trace: just as the ochre marks an Ancestral trace on the body, the acrylic marks leave an Ancestral trace on the canvas, and so too do these paintings leave their impression on the viewer as an embodied being. This implies that in viewing the work we are imprinted by it (Biddle 2007).

What is being asked of the viewer here is not simply recognition of Country, but a response that is outside of language and immediately bodily. To encounter the force of Country embodied in these paintings is to enter into a dialogue with Aboriginal peoples. The intercultural encounter does not engender a complete understanding of Aboriginal ways of being; rather, it induces a reorienting of Settler identity as the viewer experiences Country as a 'felt reality of relation' (Biddle 2007, p. 106).

As the position that Aboriginal contemporary art occupies within the Australian art practice becomes increasingly significant, it has in some ways come to eclipse the Western tradition of landscape painting as a dominant form of expressing relations to place in Australia (Muecke 2004). The works of

Western Desert women artists become significantly important to Settler encounters with and appreciation of Country. These works repeat and reiterate Country in a way that disrupts the conventional manner in which relationships between Settler, Aboriginal, place and Country have been articulated in colonial discourse. The generosity of Kathleen Petyarre's work is in its invitation to the viewer to experience the potency of Country, giving Settler Australians the opportunity to try and 'find the black soil inside' (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p. 193). However, this Country is not our own. The implications of these works for the Settler viewer is their transformative

potential, their ability to engender a dissolution of self.

In conclusion, the implication of the work of Western Desert women artists for Settler Australians is a disruption to Settler narratives of self. Within these works is an imperative for the Settler Australian viewer to experience and to respond to Country, and to reorient their relationship to place. Encountering and experiencing the work of Kathleen Petyarre and Western Desert women artists – the essence of Country embodied in the canvas – has the potential to instill Settler Australians with an enriched appreciation of Country.

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