

The Grass Ceiling: Painting, Gender and Intercultural Collaboration

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Chapter published in:

Double Desire : Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art ed. Ian McLean,
(Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2015)

If civilisation had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts.¹

- Camille Paglia, 1990

white girls can't hump.²

- Richard Bell, T-shirt, 2003

It [gender] doesn't explain everything, it doesn't explain nothing, it explains some things. And it is for the nation to think in a sophisticated way about those shades of grey.³

- Julia Gillard, 2013

In the spirit of a teaching chess game, where the players switch colours throughout, we could replace Paglia's "female hands" with "Aboriginal hands." Imagine Mr Bell as a white politician wearing a slogan of arrhythmic black girls; and Julia Gillard, Australia's first female Prime Minister, as a successful middle-aged male artist collecting his \$50,000 art prize.

We are conditioned in our prejudices, such that in the postcolonially-honed dialogues of the Australian art world, the prominence of race and identity politics tends to blind us to other complex issues such as class and gender. To put it another way, Australian art historians and critics are generally more at ease with the postcolonial than the feminine or the feminist, and are more focused on abstract notions of Indigenous agency and justice than how it actually plays out in the convoluted relations of real world politics. Thus there has been limited discussion of collaborations between black and white artists, much less from the voice of white participants. This is doubly so in the case of white women artists, such that those who engage in cross-cultural, collaborative practices with Indigenous artists have been marginalised from more rigorous debates, leading to a critical vacuum around their work.

Indigenous art from Australia's so called "remote" communities are the source of what can be described as a renaissance in Australian art. Exquisite in variety and effervescent in conceptual and material presence, acres of dappled acrylic canvases and forests of dynamic bark paintings have drip-fed the local art market and enriched its cultural institutions over the past three decades. Now generally understood as political and sacred documents of place and identity, they have colonised the Australian imaginary through their sheer aesthetic supremacy and cultural intent.

The observations aired throughout this essay were generated in part by an ongoing research project in which I am employed that is investigating black and white artists based in urban Australia who had been "apprehended" by this potent Aboriginal art in some way. Male artists are most visible in these intersections, as was reflected in the somewhat arbitrary selection of twenty-nine men and fourteen women who had, to this point, been interviewed. Cross-referencing the forty-three interviews, some cautionary gender patterns emerged. Vigorously subjective, each discussion revealed a personal set of ethics borne of professional experiences and often decades of artistic enquiry. Women's reticence to "get into trouble," to "assume" authority and to promote their own approaches as exemplary was notable, and played uncomfortably to essentialist paradigms; so too did off-record comments by a number of their male peers. None of the women interviewed used overtly theoretical arguments to establish their credentials for engaging with Aboriginal art, while many male artists tended towards an alignment of Aboriginal metaphysics and worldviews with conceptual, postminimal and postconceptual art practices. Strategic creative/muse relationships between male art historians and theorists and their male artist contemporaries are, after all, so conventional that they are invisible. Collectively, their conversations block much of the view.

The Exchange

The idea that Aboriginal art should be part of the necessary apprenticeship for all Australian artists, as Indigenous artist Trevor Nickolls wished,⁴ teases with redemptive potential, a mirage-like opportunity for reconciliation at both personal and political levels—that original trope of feminist art history. As the Pintupi explained

¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 38. Paglia's now infamous quote continues: "A contemporary woman clapping on a hard hat merely enters a conceptual system invented by men."

² Richard Bell, *T-shirt*, which he wore when he won the 2003 National Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

³ Julia Gillard, Prime Minister's resignation speech to the Canberra Press Gallery, Parliament House, June 26, 2013.

⁴ Nickolls, unpublished interview, Adelaide, June 29, 2012. Nickolls and Rover Thomas were the first Aboriginal representatives in a national pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 1990.

to American anthropologist Fred Myers, giving should not be “only one side.” It should be “level, square and square.”⁵ Sharing similar principals, *napartji-napartji* is a Pitjantjatjara phrase that negotiates “give and take,” the “exchange” in “cultural exchange.” Engagements between people, much less artists, have always incurred debts of some kind, although between black and white such exchanges have a gross history of being dishonoured by the white side. In Australia this history has an enduring resonance for non-Indigenous artists, who have to navigate their own cultural anxiety of influence and shades of postcolonial remorse, while stepping carefully in the nettle patch of intercultural engagement—with all its historical inequities. Inculcating more than lip service to ideals of *napartji-napartji*, artists are expected to offer something in return while (ideally) avoiding charges of self-interest.

So where does this leave artists who feel an obligation or desire to embark on this journey? Where is this unspoken ethic whispered, or shouted, from? Have women artists really been more cautious of critical censure in entering into these unwritten contracts, or just more judicial in risking ethical judgements? Why have white women painters turned their backs on strategies of appropriation? How does their work register in the twenty-first-century artworld? Are they victims of their own empathy? This essay invites enquiry into some of these questions through the work of Ildiko Kovacs, Kim Mahood and Mandy Martin, artists who have each worked within the cross-cultural field.

A Background: Looking over his Shoulder

Australian art critics have presented cross-cultural engagements as a succession of male interactions, a gender pattern most effectively disturbed by the Sydney modernist Margaret Preston. A rare example of the female primitivist and the first white Australian artist to advocate the use of Aboriginal art in forging a modern Australian art, Preston vivisected Aboriginal imagery from its cultural, ritual and political contexts and seized its stylistic and design potential as a means to her own artistic ends; she also encouraged other Australian artists to do the same through her publications. Preston, however, comes shackled with the nationalist label and subject position of “middle class white woman.”⁶ Ironically, one of Preston’s most compelling reiterations is through the paintings of the urban-based postcolonial Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett. A further irony is that her cross-cultural vision has been eclipsed by that of her contemporary, Arrernte man Albert Namatjira. His meeting with Melbourne watercolourist and graphic artist Rex Battarbee in 1934 is now recognized by revisionist histories as instrumental in changing cultural paradigms, and in acknowledging Aboriginal art’s modernity and its authority of place.⁷ A picturesque landscape watercolour painter, Namatjira is widely cited as an icon of Aboriginal self-determination and the first Aboriginal artist celebrity, while concurrently existing as a tragic figure unsuccessfully straddling two worlds: snared in the postcolonial ambivalence of the “cross-cultural.”

Namatjira and Battarbee are the first two *wati-pulka*⁸ [big men] artists of cross-cultural exchange. Twelve years after Namatjira’s death, the third arrived in Papunya, the government settlement 240 kms west of Alice Springs where Namatjira spent his last days. In a story that needs no lengthy retelling here, the young art teacher Geoffrey Bardon moved to the heart of Honey Ant Dreaming country to teach Aboriginal schoolkids, going down in history as a central figure in the Western Desert/Papunya Tula painting movement for encouraging Aboriginal men to translate sacred (but not secret) narratives onto boards for an outside audience. These intoxicating histories continue to be expanded on, generally giving increasing agency to Aboriginal artists, and though the conceptualisation shifts, these masculine figures segue gracefully into the closing years of the twentieth-century’s picturing of itself.

The main protagonists in the first postmodern Papunya episode of cross-cultural image making were postconceptual artists Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers, although they have more recently been challenged by urban-based black male artists such as Gordon Bennett, Brook Andrew, Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee. From the 1980s Johnson and Tillers found opportunities to relate to Aboriginal art through painting and each would, by different routes, find personal muses in the work of Western Desert painters. By identifying conceptual and metaphysical parallels within Aboriginal desert painting and refusing (probably not even asking the question in the first place) to self-censor, both cut themselves a stairway. Each brought privilege to bear on their relationships: Johnson’s Sydney pedigree and access to the artworld of collectors and curators, and Tillers’ early institutional and international success, coupled with a strong critical voice and willingness to commit himself to dialogue in text as well as paint.⁹ Despite later admitting the blunder of his infamous appropriation of Michael Nelson Jagamara’s *Five Stories*, Tillers stopped short of regret and continued in his appropriations of Aboriginal art, quoting Novalis in a quixotic explanation: “Error is the indispensable instrument of truth. With error I make truth. The complete employment of error equals the complete possession of truth.”¹⁰ As US Rear Admiral Grace Hopper quipped, it’s easier to beg forgiveness than ask for permission, as the critically endorsed collaborations between Tillers and Jagamara since 2001 have illustrated.

⁵ Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, 170.

⁶ Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*.

⁷ See Smith, “Creators and Catalysts”, 11-25.

⁸ A term common to several Western Desert languages, wati = mature/initiated man; pulka = big, great; often used synonymously with “boss”, including white administrators and senior Aboriginal men of leadership and authority.

⁹ See Tillers, “Locality Fails”.

¹⁰ Tillers, “An Auspicious Entanglement”, 19.

In acknowledging the leading men, black and white, some of whom continue to finesse these debates in pictorial and conceptual terms, it is easy to disregard their female contemporaries as casualties of Western art histories in general, tributaries off the major waterways, marginalised by a universalist art history. These are, after all, big historic and temporal narratives in Australia, but they have been largely Men's Business.¹¹

Crucially however, there is a complementary history to the men's narrative outlined above that includes a good number of women, black and white, working together creatively and artistically, but it lacks the glowing legacy or cachet associated with painting, to dig up that dated but enduring hierarchy. Performance and installation works by Anne Mosey and Dolly Daniels Nampitjinpa, and the long relational engagement between Nalda Searles and Pantjiti Mary McLean are just two examples that play back into high art/low craft debates. Women also performed and continue to play an active role as arts professionals working in remote Aboriginal art centres, but shifting the terms of those relationships from facilitator/employee to artist is rarely successful.¹²

Aboriginal women's involvement in the Western Desert Painting Movement trailed their male companions by over two decades at the Papunya Tula Company, which emerged at the same time Linda Nochlin's provocative Feminist essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists* was published in 1971.¹³ The patriarchal aspect of Aboriginal desert cultures and the collective, collaborative nature of desert painting did, however, mean women's hands, (if not their authorship), were part of the painting economy from the mid-1970s. Just as feminists in the First World West were, and are, attentive to issues of equality at a broader level, Aboriginal women continue to fight for self determination, autonomy and sexual and gender equality. While Western style feminism is incommensurable with traditional Aboriginal culture, with its strongly defined gender roles and knowledge systems, the important issue of Aboriginal women's subject experience is a sister but separate issue to those being raised here.

Collaboratively Speaking

Since the early 1980s the *a priori* status of Aboriginal art has produced a kind of endemic contemporary primitivism in the Australian mainstream. As curator Glenn Barkley notes: "Any abstract painter working in Australia today has to work out an approach to art-making that must at least consider Aboriginal art and a way of working with or through it."¹⁴ Or as sociologist and Aboriginal art scholar Vivien Johnson puts it, "What is at stake for non-Indigenous artists nowadays is to get some kind of a foothold in this new reality."¹⁵

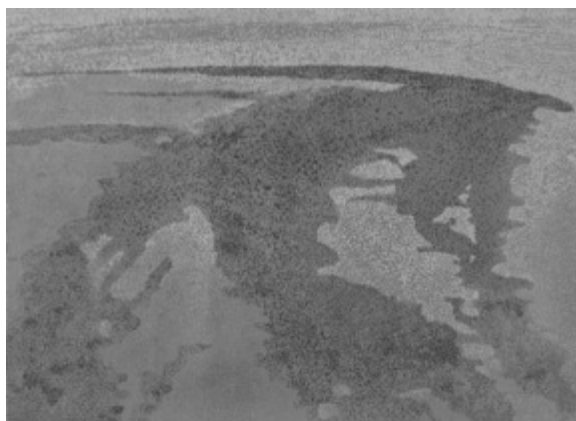


Fig. 3.1 Veronica Lulu and Kim Mahood *Fire Ghost*, 2012.

Artists are always going to pick up the gauntlet in different ways. Collaboration, so heavily endorsed in the contemporary institutions and so intrinsic to Aboriginal cultural practice, offers a potential threshold of communication, even if, as Tillers suggests, it "need not be anything more than a handshake between cultures."¹⁶ It's

¹¹ In Aboriginal cultural practice, "Men's Business" refers to initiatory and other secret/sacred rituals and knowledge systems. "Women's Business" or "Law" is also recognised, but is pitted as secondary, less dangerous and less authoritative.

¹² Marina Strocchi for example, who worked closely with artists at Haasts Bluff from 1992-1997 was instrumental in facilitating Pintupi women's painting but has been reluctant to engage in cross-cultural dialogue despite a strong stylistic resemblance between her painting and Indigenous artists she worked with. See Izett, "Sitting Down with Indigenous Artists".

¹³ Women artists were active at Balgo, Lajamanu and Yuendumu from the mid-1980s, while women started painting in their own right for the Papunya Tula company in the mid-1990s. See Strocchi, "Minyma Tjukurrpa".

¹⁴ Barkly, "Zoom", 408.

¹⁵ Fenner, *Talking About Abstraction*, n.p.

¹⁶ Imants Tillers artist talk, Jan Manton Gallery, Brisbane, February 28, 2012.

true that some handshakes are firmer than others, but only the performers can know the real pressure of the contact point and the value (or disappointments) of the shared experience.

Veronica Lulu and Kim Mahood's 2012 painting *Fire Ghost* (fig. 3.1) pitches the viewer into light aircraft altitude. An aerial landscape of pointillist rust and greens, the visual codes link it "square and square" with Aboriginal and European pictorial conventions, the birds-eye and the panorama. There is no horizon, but its illusionary line can be imagined just beyond the frame, the vanishing point clearly established. The systematic dotting connotes its Indigenous status, but its readiness for a Western reading, the cartographic sweep of seasonal fire movements scored black across the ochre ground, makes the work a document with a double purpose.

A collaboration between long term friends and colleagues, *Fire Ghost* was first shown in *Desert Lake* at Araluen Arts Centre, an exhibition curated by Mandy Martin as part of a longer-term intercultural land care project between Walmajarri and "outsiders"¹⁷ around Paruku (Lake Gregory in North Western Australia).¹⁸ Cited by Central Australian critic Kieran Finnane as "humble but highly communicative,"¹⁹ *Fire Ghost* stands as a marker of engagement borne of pragmatism. For Mahood, who has lifelong connections to the Tanami region and has worked with the local Walmajarri custodians since 2005, there was nothing unusual in roughing out the painting's structure as requested by Lulu. Working together dotting in the keys to vegetation and fire-scars was a natural progression.²⁰ "We needed a means of recording both kinds of knowledge that didn't compromise either. The template of a painted topographic map provided common ground and could be read easily by both Aboriginal people and *kartiya* [white people]."²¹ This cross-cultural mapping, closely aligned with desert painting initiatives, has become something of a contemporary genre in which both Mahood and Martin have found different modes of working.²²

Fire Ghost remains more map than metaphor in its "straight talking" to both audiences. It is not masquerading as Mahood's triumphal gesture, nor as a decontextualised art object, both points for another essay. Here I would argue that the stories behind the collaborations can be more significant than the work they generate, either displacing the work altogether or endorsing it categorically. The "problem child" [the collaborative piece] may be conceived by complex motivations, but the artworks also come about through chance studio encounters or attractions, not unlike an unplanned, though not necessarily unwanted, pregnancy. An untitled collaborative painting by Molly Nampitjin Miller, Yaritji Connelly and Ildiko Kovacs has quite a different emphasis than *Fire Ghost*, but it is made more interesting because of its biography—or, to borrow from the Aboriginal art marketing tradition, the painting's "story."

Round in Circles

"So, where's your country, sister?" Ildiko Kovacs is a Sydney based artist who works into the gestural, abstract tradition. Downplaying any overt theoretical engagement, her practice is best described not so much as anti-intellectual but non-textual, what curator Terence Maloon calls "an intensely physical, non-verbal, non-conceptual relationship with media and imagery."²³ The embodied process of her work could be written into the sand with blood, finding an Aboriginal women's performative parallel in "a breasted ontology,"²⁴ but her primarily urban experience and non-initiate status rules that out. Kovacs is art school trained in the *atelier* model rather than the research higher degrees now promoted widely in Australian universities. Her expansive painting practice follows a chronology of influence through the American canon of Gorky, Guston and Twombly and their Australian contemporaries Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson, as well as a number of contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Rover Thomas and Paddy Bedford.

An exhibitor in *Talking About Abstraction*, curated by Felicity Fenner in Sydney in 2004, Kovacs exemplified the urban-based white artists involved. As the title suggested, Fenner put forward a primitivist thesis that, quite consciously, had little to do with the conceptual origins of Aboriginal paintings, but cast the desert paintings as panaceas, "[throwing] a lifeline to young Australian painters seeking to reinvest the medium with the meaning and significance once championed by the early modernists."²⁵ *Talking About Abstraction*, which included paintings by

¹⁷ "Outsider" is an ethnographic term for observer/visitor/non-initiate, i.e. "outside" the initiates. For an excellent account of the notion of outsider/insider in Australian Indigenous practices—in this case the Yolngu—see Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, 75-99.

¹⁸ Martin is also an exhibitor in *Desert Lake*, which will be launched at The Centre for Art + Environment, Reno, Nevada in 2014

¹⁹ Finnane, "Desert Lake"[Review], 136.

²⁰ Mahood, unpublished interview, November 28, 2012.

²¹ Martin, "Desert Lake", 48.

²² Mahood worked on *We Don't Need a Map: a Martu Experience of the Western Desert* (2012). In 2013, Martu Artists collaborated with Sydney-based film maker Lynette Wallworth and New York-based singer Antony, whose work was commissioned by The Adelaide Biennial, *Dark Heart*, Art Gallery of South Australia March 1—May 11, 2014. Another example of intercultural mapping was the Canning Stock Route Project initiated in 2006, culminating in the exhibition *Yiwarra Kuju: Canning Stock Route* at the National Museum of Australia (2010), in which Mahood was the only white exhibitor, an indication of her bona-fide desert credentials, while Martin's field-trips with Ikuntji and Mangkaja artists led to exhibitions in 2005 and 2009 respectively.

²³ Cunningham, *Ildiko Kovacs*, 6.

²⁴ Biddle, *Breasts, Bodies, Art*.

²⁵ Fenner, *Thinking Beyond Abstraction*, n.p.

²⁵ Fenner, *Thinking Beyond Abstraction*, n.p.

black and white artists, took its cue from purely formal interests cited by the white artists, but it remains an important chapter in the conversation of influence and tentative engagements.

Artists Molly Nampitjin Miller and Yaritji Connelly are Pitjantjatjara women born in the desert at Waka Pukatjara and Malara Rockhole respectively. Half a generation older than Kovacs, with all the implications seniority holds in Aboriginal cultural status, the painters invited Kovacs to their desert studio as representatives of Ninuku Arts at Kalka in the Tomlinson Ranges. “She came out here because we wanted to work in new ways. All the women wanted to learn new ways.”²⁶



Fig. 3.2 Molly Nampitjin Miller and Ildiko Kovacs, *Untitled*, 2010.

There is an existing template for collaborative paintings on canvas, substantiated by aeons of ceremonial and collective sand paintings. More recently, the completed paintings have been used to canvass Aboriginal land claims, to establish connections to country and language groups, or as *Fire Ghost* attempts, to portray dual knowledge systems. Connelly/Kovacs/Miller’s *Untitled* (2010) (fig. 3.2) follows the standard, with artists sitting and working from the edges on a prone painting surface demarcating boundaries in flat pictorial space with acrylic paint, its plasticity far removed from the index of country that ochre, sand or blood fulfils. This of itself is not a failure, and if Western art criticism fails Aboriginal painting, it is doubly confronted by collaborative works where ethics and attitude erase the visual and replace it, ontologically at least, with spectacle. The paintings are rarely the point of focus. In this tripartite work, blocks of sugary pink and yellow ochre are anchored in grey, olive green and deep maroon, raising colourists’ heckles and that rarely voiced but persistent question in the art centre: “who chose the paint tubs?”—as if it really matters. Orientation is arbitrary—the painting is reproduced vertically in the catalogue and hangs horizontally in the exhibition.²⁷ It is difficult to identify individual marks, although there is a signature Kovacs loop in one quadrant that gives an evocation of distance and perspective. No dots pervade the rolled surface, so in that respect it is an experimental excursion in technique for Miller and Connelly: “We like to do collaboration because it’s good fun. Thinking together.”²⁸ Does that constitute a handshake? Is it less rigorous than it “ought to be” because it is more or less a one off, and the artists didn’t share a long history?

During her residency at Ninuku Arts, Kovacs made a more conceptually challenging painting with senior law man, *ngankari* [traditional healer] and artist Harry Tjutjuna, although as she described the process it was a case of

²⁶ Radok, *roads cross*, 54. It should be noted that Ninuku Artists’ manager Claire Eltringham (previously the editor of *Australian Aboriginal Art*), had an interest in promoting the art centre through cross-cultural painting workshops, as do some other art centres and/or managers. Dallas Gold, Director of Raft Artspace, also valued such painting exchanges.

²⁷ First exhibited in *The Shared Language of Paint*, Raft Artspace, Alice Springs June 9 – July 9, 2011 with paintings by Harry Tjutjuna, Monica Puntjina Watson and Sandy Brumby. *Untitled* was acquired by Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide where it was shown in *roads cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art*, 2012–2014 (touring).

²⁸ Email correspondence, cited in Radok, *roads cross*, 54.

Kovacs taking dictation: a mark-making secretary to a senior custodian.²⁹ Reputedly Tjutjuna has a platonic interest in women, having survived two wives, and he jokes about painting lots of women, from behind. He also paints the *Wati Nyiru* story in the Seven Sisters *Tjukurrpa*, where the [Lothario] protagonist chases the wrong-skin sisters until they escape into the sky and become the Pleiades constellation. A flirtation on canvas perhaps, a cheeky but throwaway gesture by Tjutjuna, he was never in breach of his authority. As he states, “The only way to paint together is with a *kungka* (girl/woman) story, that’s *minymaku* (a women’s) story. That is separate to Men’s: *kutjupa* (different/other) Business.”³⁰

If Tjutjuna was teasing Kovacs, casting mock love magic her way, it would not be out of place. Men and women’s *Tjukurrpa* are rife with creation stories, and strict kinship laws enforce codes of sexual conduct. Nevertheless, when word circulated throughout neighbouring desert communities, concerns were raised about the “appropriateness” of the Kovacs painting done alongside Tjutjuna. In response, Ninuku artists asked that the work not be exhibited publically. It wasn’t, although the collaborations between the women were. I would speculate here that a form of Aboriginal ethical intervention was at play, primarily out of concern for Kovacs’ own safety given Tjutjuna’s power, and not by a transgression in simply working together across the race and gender divides.

Getting on Site

When no one met the plane, the pilot lit a signal fire. It burned all the way to the community and destroyed the women’s sacred objects. Set against a smoky sky, the cursive red ochre text both entitles and inverts the modest watercolour painting from Kim Mahood’s 2006 *Tanami Postcards* series (fig. 3.3). On the painting’s ground, the scars of this fire leave a calligraphic litter that imitates a prehistory of sacred and perfunctory objects—the artefacts of the everyday easily disguising the numinous: burnt-out Spinifex grass rings, desiccated shrubs, ash-limbs. Laden with wry observations, the postcards’ inscriptions act as soundtrack to the images. A canny listener and storyteller, Mahood is privileged to “true stories” of both humour and grave pathos: massacres are named and white cultural ignorance is called out alongside whimsical paintings of camp dogs.



Fig. 3.3 Kim Mahood *Postcards from the Tanami* #19, 2006.

Getting on the ground, literally into the space of alterity, gaining some geographical and relational purchase on authority—or at least understanding—would seem to be a minimum apprenticeship for the artist working inter-culturally, (although as Tillers and Jagamara found, the third space of a city gallery/studio and the Fluxus inspired practice of an “analogue” postal service has its advantages).³¹ The place of engagement becomes what Hal Foster describes as the place of “ethnographic mapping ... of a community ... as a primary form of site-specific art.”³² But what does it actually look like, and how do you get there in the case of remote community art centres?

There are some earlier historic exceptions, but the current and widespread model of the mostly Government-funded community art centre has been steadily increasing since the mid-1980s with a spike in the late 1990s. Small art centres employ one or two art coordinators or managers, larger community centres have more employees who are generally outsiders with professional arts training, employed for their capacity to manage money without familial or kinship obligations. The multitask job descriptions for these employees include a tacit, largely unwritten and sometimes problematic gatekeeper’s role, a hybrid evolution of paternalism endorsed by artworld exclusivity and “ethnographer envy”³³—though neither art theory nor feminist theory is much help in penetrating this complex political terrain, the interface of disparity and difference creating mountains that require endless small actions and

²⁹ Kovacs, unpublished interview, February 20, 2012.

³⁰ Ninuku Artists unpublished letter to *roads cross* curators, May 8, 2012.

³¹ The collaborations between the two artists from 2001 were mailed back and forwards and negotiated by a third party, Michael Eather, and his Fireworks Gallery in Brisbane.

³² Foster, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, 185.

³³ *Ibid.*, 181.

gestures of integrity and humour. In their minutiae these experiences and exchanges slowly inculcate a foundation for working together. Sustained over time, a temporal hierarchy emerges: some outsiders are more outsiders than others.

Kim Mahood embodies a rare hybrid authority that non-Indigenous, especially urban based, Australians can only dream of. Born into a bohemian pastoral family on Aboriginal country in Central Australia, Mahood is self-effacing in her inherited, quasi-aristocratic mythology. The aura of the original work of art may be a redundant category, but regarding the cross-cultural, Aboriginal art and its attendant engagements, “authority” and “a history,” have become “the new black.” Bestowed a skin-name and a personalised woomera and coolamon as a baby, her great opportunity as a cross-cultural interpreter is also her greatest obligation as an artist and writer. Acclaimed essayist and novelist, Mahood’s award winning memoir *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000) was published eight years after returning to Tanami country following an absence of twenty years. Since then she has returned regularly to take up the dichotomies of metropolis/desert/black/white, capitalising on these tensions without being cauterised by either extreme. Extrapolating on the irony of language, Mahood identifies the “outback” as an outward facing extrovert myth, heroic, conquest-driven [masculine], against the inland/introverted myth of spiritual quest and mysterious source. The former she acknowledges as out of favour in postcolonial theory, the latter often confused with Aboriginal attachment to land which has, subjectively at least and to varying degrees, occluded outsiders’ [white] connection to place/country.³⁴



Fig. 3.4 Ildiko Kovacs, *Bounce*, 2008.

By way of comparison, Kovacs made her first approach to Aboriginal artists in 1995, living in the isolated northwest Australian town of Broome for ten months and exploring the Kimberley’s archaic rock-art sites. A decade later Kovacs observed Gija artist Paddy Bedford painting in Kununurra, an experience that made a significant impression, snaking its way into her consciousness to emerge in concert with her own visual dynamics in paintings such as *Hovering Light* (2009) and *Bounce* (2008) (fig. 3.4). These works humbly reference Bedford as a dynamic force in contemporary painting while staying within the frames of homage and exploration—unlike the intimate, complex creative relationship that Bedford and art dealer and painter Tony Oliver shared, or the critically acclaimed dialogue between New Zealand born Peter Adsett and Gija artist Rusty Peters.³⁵ Rather than conjecturing a theoretical language as a strategy, Kovacs’ trust and investment in the mute materiality of paint may partly explain why her intercultural explorations have been criticised rather than critiqued on their own terms.

Understandably cautious of using the term influence, Kovacs suggests the idea of “inspiration... as something which is ‘soaked up’ in its own time.”³⁶ She is conscious of the terrain of collaboration and perceived Aboriginal stylistic influence, but, like Tillers, believes it is equally problematic not to engage with Indigenous artists both directly and indirectly, just as she does with non-Indigenous artists. For Aboriginal art centres to deny such

³⁴ Mahood, *Craft for a Dry Lake*, 251-252.

³⁵ *Two Laws—One Big Spirit: Rusty Peters and Peter Adsett*, Darwin: 24 Hr Art, Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art.

³⁶ Kovacs, unpublished interview, February 20, 2012.

engagements, they risk becoming “a one-way vacuum, a cultural relic, an isolated production line without interaction and discussion.”³⁷ Similarly, Aboriginal anthropologist and activist Marcia Langton makes a strong case for the creolisation of Australian culture, a kind of call and response between settlers and Aboriginals in visual arts practice.³⁸

Kovacs’ reflections followed two residencies in Aboriginal art centres in 2008 and 2010, the latter discussed earlier in this essay. The first, at Mangkaja Artists in Fitzroy Crossing, was profiled in the short-lived *Australian Aboriginal Art* journal, the only local publication of its kind to be printed in French and English. The working space inhabited by Kovacs and senior painter Wakartu Cory Surprise, lavishly photographed, was presented in majestic terms as a mutually gratifying studio exchange, the “synergy between the work of Kovacs and Surprise—a conversation about colour, abstracted shape and paint itself—that speaks across cultures, inspirations and generations” having positive flow-on effects for both artists.³⁹

Such claims are met with suspicion across the Australian artworld, increasingly regulated as it is by urban-based perspectives of “best practice” in a bureaucratically-managed and economically-motivated industry. Emotionally charged engagements, feminine discourse (or no discourse, as the case may be), or activities even remotely conflated with a “New Age” spirituality are at odds with institutional efforts to regulate or sanction, from a distance, self-conscious postcolonial intersections invariably laced with romanticism. The spell of being “out bush” in Aboriginal jurisdictions is a powerful—if not always empowering—experience, and Kovacs’ warmth and Hungarian heritage coupled with the circling metaphor of her line and the vigorous loopholes of her wet-on-wet painterly language may be disquieting to the Anglo secular sensibility. Likewise, even a perceived daring to align her practice with an Indigenous studio aesthetic is inflammatory to some Indigenous points of view. Reading Kovacs’ paintings closely, it is easy enough to pick out the kind of cross fertilisation that occurs between artists more generally, from remote Aboriginal art centres to New York studios.⁴⁰ A natural inclination to “make like, to try out” a new pictorial rhythm or palette for instance, as Miller and Connelly did, is not culturally exclusive: neither is “showing off” to other painters. Indigenous artists constantly find gratification through improvisation, influence and competition in bush studios, which are invariably collective enterprises. It is the white artist, acculturated as the solitary individual, who is out of her comfort zone.

Landscape Falling: Country Rising

For two hundred years landscape painting in Australia rode largely unchallenged as a pan-national brand of white man’s identity. In the 1980s Mandy Martin was achieving recognition for her post-feminist romantic sublime landscape paintings, storming that well established masculine, magisterial vision of place. Her winning submission for Canberra’s new Parliament House, *Red Ochre Cove* (1988), over 12 metres in width, can be cited as a monumental triumph of a feminist nature, but it came with some clauses. At an authorial level, Martin’s brief included an obligatory reference to Tom Roberts’ 1901-03 celebration of Federation of Australia painting, which Martin achieved through a tactical shaft of sunlight.⁴¹ The commission was linked to the bicentenary of British settlement, a year of national reckoning, when brighter spotlights were being trained on all modes of representation by postcolonial imaginations. Aboriginal art was persuasively colonising the artistic ground: the forecourt of Parliament House was being symbolically transformed by Jagamara’s *Possum and Wallaby Dreaming* mosaic; *The Aboriginal Memorial* made its heraldic, elegiac entrance into the collective consciousness, first in the 1988 *Biennale of Sydney* and then in its final destination at the National Gallery of Australia.

Martin’s painting practice has always retained its landscape formula, but her 1970s feminist and political activism has never been dormant. Since the mid-1990s, her environmentalism found an expression in Aboriginal communities through expansive cross-disciplinary research in collaboration with naturalists, historians, scientists and conservationists. Art historical readings of landscape also underpin her practice, which has been negotiated within a long-term academic career as painting lecturer at the Australian National University. Martin has participated in a number of artists’ field trips to remote Aboriginal communities, on occasion with Mahood, however collaborations closer to home with Wirudjuri artist Trisha Carroll around Cowra in central western NSW express an unexpectedly affective quality. The artists originally met through a community link-up project, but it was shared environmental and heritage concerns surrounding large scale mining operations in the Lachlan Valley that inspired the collaborative painting series *Absence and Presence* in 2004.⁴²

All the paintings are site specific but off-register, as Carroll and Martin consciously avoided direct mimesis in deference to the Wirudjuri cultural sensitivity (scar trees, rock art and scatter sites) of the area. Landscapes in the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Langton, “Creolising Australian Visual Culture”, *roads cross*, 12-15.

³⁹ Martin-Chew, “Collaborations”, 108. In spite of the misleading title, neither Kovacs nor Surprise worked on the same paintings. Months before, artist Jonathan Kimberley arranged a residency and a series of collaborations with Kayili Artists at Patjarr, an episode documented by Anthony Gardner (“Brave New Worlds”) for the more critically received *Eyeline*.

⁴⁰ As is apparent in *Sitting down with Jukuja and Wakartu*, exhibited at Raft Artspace in Darwin, 2009. It included paintings by Kovacs, Surprise and Jukuja Dolly Snell.

⁴¹ Tom Roberts, “The Big Picture”, full title: *The Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York, 9 May 1901*. See Haynes, *Mandy Martin, Paintings 1981-2009*, 12.

⁴² Martin, *Absence and Presence*.

conventional sense overlaid with Aboriginal symbols in the conventional sense (concentric circles, U-shapes, totemic animals), the series is restricted in palette. Using locally sourced earth pigments and black and white, the works are both indexical and nostalgic: eerie, genteel palimpsests that, like initial collaborations between Tillers and Jagamara,⁴³ are sometimes self-consciousness but also representative of an empathetic *gesture*. Perhaps not major concourses, nevertheless something of value lingers in these essentially modest works, scratched out in collective soil with willingness and intent. This disjunction, so central to *Absence and Presence 2* (2004) (fig. 3.5), is the core of its subject and overriding iconography. A bright plume of cumulus floats against an unyielding limestone sentinel in a deft and well-tested sublime tradition. The work's tension is further inscribed by Carroll's elliptical foreground/surface: the coolamon/feminine archetypal form floating in vertical space acts both as an entry point and a stop sign. Relating directly to the traditional Aboriginal sign of ancestral energy and meeting places, it also alludes to the archetypal mandorla or *vesica piscis* that symbolizes the meeting of opposing worlds (and genders) in the mythic origins of life.



Fig. 3.5 Trisha Carroll and Mandy Martin, *Absence and Presence 2*, 2004.

Martin and Carroll agreed at the outset of their painting project that works which failed aesthetically would be destroyed, something that not all collaborators consider.⁴⁴ This might seem to privilege white aesthetic judgements, however such assumptions simultaneously dismiss Indigenous agency and potentially *over* emphasise the relational values of collaboration. Lest we forget, the entire contemporary Aboriginal art movement has been formulated on inter-cultural role playing, not least in the selection and promotion of certain artists and aesthetics over others.

Curatorial Critiques

Australia has agonised over taxonomies in museums and public galleries since the 1950s. While Indigenous art is understood in enlightened circles as a robust contemporary artform, its positioning is still under scrutiny. Ethnographic echoes and charges of primitivism persist, but the emerging curatorial voices on influence and cultural exchange between black and white have been surprisingly provocative. Interestingly, women have had a strong presence in the more recent of these exhibitions as both curators and artists.⁴⁵

A decade after the innovative *Balance*, 1990 at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, *From Appreciation to Appropriation: Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art* (2000), curated by Christine Nicholls for Flinders University Art Museum in Adelaide, presented an historical sweep that placed Tillers and Johnson in primary position. Paradoxically, the artist who attracted the most criticism was Elizabeth Durack for her appropriation, not only of an Aboriginal style, but in assuming the identity and gender of a mythical Aboriginal elder, Eddie Burrup.

⁴³ See McLean & Rey, "Black and White".

⁴⁴ Martin, unpublished interview, November 29, 2012, Cowra NSW.

⁴⁵ *Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences* was a watershed exhibition held at the Queensland Art Gallery. Co-ordinated by Michael Eather and Marlene Hall and drawing on a colloquium of indigenous and non-indigenous members, over 150 artists, collectives and collaborations were included. Women were represented, but in the minority. *From Appreciation to Appropriation* showed fifteen men, (seven white/eight black), nine women, (three white/six black). *Talking About Abstraction* (2004): eight women (five white/three black), five men (one white/four black). *roads cross* showed eleven women (eight white/three black), nine men (seven white/two black).

Celebrated in another era for her Irish grazier family's dynastic reign over the Kimberley (historicised in her sister Mary Durack's novel *Kings in Grass Castles*), Elizabeth Durack's strategy backfired, confining her to Australian art history as a joke and a thief twice over, a "girl's own" Ern Malley.⁴⁶ *From Appreciation to Appropriation* hosted a forum of artists and scholars whose closing comments shaped a foreclosing: these zones are too difficult and too sensitive for the sometimes anarchic, mostly instinctive and even playful trysts that art kicks around. No rapprochement is possible. Better to leave well alone.⁴⁷ As Métis artist and curator David Garneau argued during a 2009 visit to Australia:

Being ethical is not a pre-requisite for being an artist, although it is required of curators. Curators are censors ... and have responsibilities to follow guidelines, act within a dialogue [etcetera] and give reason to their choices and discriminations ... In their studios, artists should do as they please ... but publications and exhibitions become another matter, a social matter.⁴⁸

Aside from giving curators a mandate to social censorship—arguably a role they fulfil by other means anyway, this suggestion strikes too cautious a chord. Cross-cultural interactions, especially those that are purely formal or stylistically ambiguous, without any inter-relational currency to buoy them along, are capable of causing personal anguish—to both parties—but artists have always required an armour as well as a porous skin to make art and to show it publically. Nevertheless I would argue that the politics of race, so finely wound up in artistic engagements, can become a dust storm that disguises more sinister gender power struggles. I speak from some personal experience as a youngish woman at the time, working in remote art centres where Aboriginal women were effectively "manning" the economic and cultural mother ship that the art centre represents, often to the shame or discomfort of local men—not all of whom were artists. While this is a generalisation (Tiwi artists for example were more gender-integrated than Western Desert artists, and each art centre has a unique history), the separation of men's and women's business and knowledge has all the jagged edges that attend the universal male/female binary. Battles over gendered authority and power were as much a part of the daily fabric as any intercultural tension—and I can't add quickly enough, so too were the dynamic and creative sexual/inter-gender tensions that played out not just in the *Tjukurrpa* narratives that gave the studio oxygen, but in other culturally specific manifestations and in the necessary comedy of postcolonial family life.

I suspect it was gender as much as cultural identity that played out behind the scenes as Fiona Salmon, Anita Angel and Vivonne Thwaites were mounting the 2012 curatorial project *roads cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art*. At the heart of what was a complex display of conflicting authorities, men at Tjala Arts in Amata (200 kms east of Kalka's Ninuku Arts), supported by Indigenous city-based artist and curator Jonathan Jones (who was negotiating his own role in an intercultural Men's project at the time), tried to effect a boycott of the exhibition, encouraging artists to withdraw. Ostensibly this was for its inclusion of the Connelly/ Kovacs/Miller *Untitled* work discussed above, which I suggest acted as a decoy for the Tjutjuna-directed Kovacs painting. The charges from the Tjala men were that white artists were capitalising on their experiences with Aboriginal people, expressly, "There are stories that are not your stories to tell."⁴⁹ It may also be true that there are stories which are not theirs to stop, something of an ongoing issue. No stranger to the territory, Salmon was always aware of the curatorial risks that *roads cross* had to navigate:

Any art that's made in the shadow of colonialism is going to be sensitive. There are always questions people want to ask about who is benefiting from that connection with an Aboriginal person or Aboriginal place.⁵⁰

Neither Tjala Arts nor Jones took part in any public forums nor publications associated with *roads cross*, and Kovacs was never directly engaged in the discussion, though artists at Ninuku wrote a letter in support of her residency, stating their interest in working cross-culturally.⁵¹ Kovacs expressed her sense of alienation following the collaborative and curatorial experience:

I had to remove myself completely from the whole Indigenous thing. I mean I'm still as interested in the paintings ... but I was never part of the conversation, no one ever picked up the phone ... it wasn't about the work, it was about a politic that was drummed up for other people's agendas.⁵²

Roads cross opened without picket lines or paintballs, touring to Darwin and Alice Springs, but events in March 2014 revisited the terrain when some senior men at Amata tried to prevent the South Australian Museum's

⁴⁶ In 1944 the literary journal *Angry Penguins* edited by the poet Max Harris, published a posthumous selection of modern poems by Ern Malley, a figure who never existed.

⁴⁷ See Nicholls, *From Appreciation to Appropriation*, cited in Mclean, "Between Indigenous and Contemporary Art", 29.

⁴⁸ Garneau, public forum, College of Fine Arts, Sydney, May 1, 2009.

⁴⁹ Letter from Tjala Arts addressed to Fiona Salmon, curator at Flinders University Art Museum, April 13, 2011, and copied to Aboriginal arts advocacy bodies.

⁵⁰ Cormack, "The Ethics of Cultural Borrowing".

⁵¹ Unpublished letter from Ninuku Arts to *roads cross* curators and Indigenous curators in Australia's state museums, May 8, 2012.

⁵² In conversation with Kovacs, February 11, 2014.

Ngintaka exhibition from opening in the first public expression of the extensive *Songlines* project initiated in 2009. While the complexities and contradictions of cross-cultural consultation are endless, there was nothing ambiguous in artist and elder Hector Burton's statement to consummate desert reporter Nicolas Rothwell: "These women doing this exhibition aren't our sisters. They're white, not black. They have another skin. Go back to the other side of the sun. Don't interfere and take what's ours."⁵³

Mahood, although quoted out of context here in relation to her own multi-disciplined practice, may be wrong when she says: "Artists can hide behind marks. Writers need to know what they want to say."⁵⁴ If artists are unwilling to be beholden to language other than paint and its contortions, their empathy and their ethics may well be questioned. Silence may be the wrong virtue in this hot climate.

White Girls Can't ...?

When appropriation artist and provocateur Richard Bell received the Telstra Art Award in 2003 (at the time the country's richest prize for Indigenous art), he infamously—and regrettably, given its attention stealing slogan—wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with the text: *white girls can't hump*, upstaging his winning painting's more enduring and compelling statement, *Aboriginal art, it's a white thing*. Bell's T-shirt would have been an effective hook-up tool at the award's after party, and a welcome reminder that everything can be lubricated with humour, the drier the better. But there is a grain of sand in every truth: white women do enjoy the political privileges of the white sovereign class, but they are, it would seem, more chastened by the moral low ground that whites tend to assume on the intercultural dance floor.

Challenges from ringside are not always as overtly gendered as Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson's disenchantment with white feminism, borrowed from bell hooks et al, but it may encourage prudence:

Whiteness needs to be interrogated as a specific form of privilege. However the real challenge for white feminists is to theorise the relinquishment of power so that feminist practice can contribute to changing the racial order. Until this challenge is addressed, the subject-position *middle-class white woman* will remain centred as a site of dominance.⁵⁵

However, the assumption that whites always hold power is challenged by first-hand experience of the intercultural. Mahood, divested of the mystique factor for Aboriginality, says it's a fallacy that whites hold all the power in collaborations:

They can influence the way the work happens, but in the end if it's a real engagement the negotiating process has a significant impact on the work. Any white artist who puts in the time is changed, and so is the work, by the experience. If you are a serious artist, and you spend the time, something's going to happen, whether it's actually on the canvas or not.⁵⁶

To close with a cliché, painting remains part of the problem, rooted in modernism and prickling with machismo. This is not to suggest that women should be taking cues from old men's T-shirts but nevertheless, *white girls can't hump* could be a deftly disguised appropriation of twentieth-century anti-modernist Lionel Lindsay's provocation that "the superficial nature of modern painting attracts [women's] light hands; picture or hat, all is one."⁵⁷ If we replace "modern painting" with "the contemporary" and throw our hats in the ring, light hands may in fact be well placed to take up the challenge of these complex, but essential, intercultural engagements.

I owe special thanks to Ildiko Kovacs, Kim Mahood and Mandy Martin for their engagement with the ideas of this chapter.

⁵³ Rothwell, "Desert Storm". Burton was targeting female anthropologists, academics and curators with long histories in the field and closely allied with the local Aboriginal women's council. For a report on the ensuing legal dispute, see Gosford, "Ngintaka's Long Road to Adelaide".

⁵⁴ Mahood, unpublished interview, November 28, 2012.

⁵⁵ Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Women*, 186.

⁵⁶ Mahood, unpublished interview, November 28, 2012.

⁵⁷ Lindsay, *Addled Art*, 53.

