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978-0-521-12067-8 - White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art

Ian McLean

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WHITE ABORIGINES

Identity Politics in Australian Art

White Aborigines is an investigation of how identities have been constructed in Australian art from 1788 to the present. Beginning with a discussion of the ways in which Australia was imagined by Europeans before colonisation, Ian McLean traces the representation of indigeneity—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—through the history of Australian art. In doing so, he tells the story of the invention of an Australian subjectivity. He argues that the colonising culture invested far more in indigenous aspects of the country and its inhabitants than it has been willing to admit. McLean considers artists and their work within a cultural context and also provides a contemporary theoretical and critical context for his claims. He proposes strikingly original readings of the practices of several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, concluding with a detailed discussion of the work of Gordon Bennett.

Ian McLean is a senior lecturer in art history and theory at the School of Art, University of Tasmania. He is the author of *The Art of Gordon Bennett* (with Gordon Bennett, 1996), and his articles have appeared in journals including *Third Text*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Art and Australia*, *Agenda* and the *Australian Journal of Art*.

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All ruling strata claim to be the
oldest settlers, autochthonous.

Theodor Adorno

Minima Moralia, p. 155

For Sumai

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Preface

This book discusses how the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 'Australia' were imagined in Australian painting over the previous two hundred years. My aim is to do more than trace a particular theme in the history of Australian painting; it is to tell a story of the invention of an Australian subjectivity.

The purpose of my interpretative history is to test an argument, not provide a comprehensive account of Australian painting. My analysis of paintings and, at times, other forms of expression, is presented as evidence that, in Australia, the colonising culture invested far more in indigenous aspects of the place than they have been willing to admit. The revelations of Elizabeth Durack's and Leon Carmen's Aboriginalised alter egos are only the most recent examples of the desire by the colonising culture to be white Aborigines. This desire, sanctioned by the doctrine of *terra nullius*, forms a disturbing and even obsessive undercurrent in Australian mythologies of identity. It is an unresolved social issue and shows every sign of remaining so for a long time.

The tracking of the representation of indigency in Australian painting involves more than investigating those paintings which include images of Aborigines – particularly since the relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines have been, and still are, primarily governed by issues of land ownership. Further, the psychology of representation and its stagings in allegory and other symbolic forms, along with an understanding of the concepts which inform Western thinking about identity, are important to my discussion. Implicit in my argument is the persistence of age-old Western meta-narratives of identity which continue to stage our politics of identity, and which are constituted as much by the constructions of forgetting as by memory.

The first three chapters discuss and place in historical context the

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ideas and ideologies which staged the initial imagining, exploration, invasion and settlement of Australia by Europeans – ideologies which galvanised around concepts of the Antipodes, utopia, melancholy and redemption. The remaining chapters, which are loosely linked in chronological order to suggest an historical narrative, trace the picturings of identities in Australian painting during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and conclude with a discussion of the contemporary urban Aboriginal artist, Gordon Bennett. Finally, I have written a postscript that directly engages with the theoretical concerns that drive my argument.

My argument owes a considerable debt to the large number of excellent and insightful studies of colonial cultures, and in particular, of Australian culture, that have been published in the last decade. However, Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific*, published nearly thirty years ago, remains the starting point of any study of Australian culture from the perspective of cultural interactions between indigenous and colonising peoples. Of the many recent studies, Robert Dixon's *The Course of Empire and Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788–1860* is a much-valued book which I often returned to for guidance. Ian Burn's and Paul Carter's writings, as different as they are from each other, have always been an inspiration, especially in their attention to the aesthetic dimensions of pictures and texts. Ross Gibson was another early inspiration, and it was probably his film, *Camera Natura*, which first set me thinking seriously about notions of Australian identity.

I have been particularly fortunate to have received the considerable input of Bernard Smith, who supervised the PhD thesis from which this book is drawn. I wish to especially thank him for the generosity of his time and ideas, and for his continued support.

I also must thank Sneja Gunew and Terry Smith who, in their reports on my thesis, provided invaluable suggestions for its working into a book; Paul Carter, Nikos Papastergiadis and Kay Schaffer, for their intelligent comments on various aspects of my argument; Gordon and Leanne Bennett for patiently and thoroughly answering my many questions during the research for chapter 8; and to the many colleagues who responded to my published essays and conferences and seminar papers – many of which were the starting points of the chapters in this book. Finally, this book would not have been as elegant without the patient editors at Cambridge University Press – Phillipa McGuinness and Jane Farago, the readings of Sue Rowley, and the excellent editorial work of Lee White.

No matter how fine one's sources and colleagues, in the end the writer must claim responsibility for what is written, especially since all histories, and especially interpretative histories such as this, are highly selective accounts. At this point, as I write the last words before returning the

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edited manuscript to the publisher, I realise that I can do nothing more about the many omissions and generalisations which my overly ideological reading of paintings and texts produced, and, with some relief, leave it for others to judge me on these counts.

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In 1993 the University of Tasmania funded twelve months study leave for research at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne, as part of my PhD work on the representation of Aborigines in Australian painting. I particularly appreciated the help of Professor Margaret Manion and Dr Roger Benjamin in looking after my needs there, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, who allowed me to use the facilities of the Centre for Australian Studies.