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## **The Return of the Silenced: Aboriginal Art as a Flagship of New Australian Identity**

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines the presence of Aboriginal art, its contact with colonial and federation Australian art to prove that silencing of this art from the official identity narrative and art histories also served elimination of Aboriginal people from national and identity discourse. It posits then that the recently observed acceptance and popularity as well as incorporation of Aboriginal art into the national Australian art and art histories of Australian art may be interpreted as a sign of indigenizing state nationalism and multicultural national identity of Australia in compliance with the definition of identity according to Anthony B. Smith.

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Identity, especially national identity, is a tricky issue and concept. It becomes even more problematic with reference to settler-colonial states in postcolonial times. In the past, the authors' attempts to define Australian identity invariably led to a definition which had Britishness as its essential part, rooted in British discovery and settlement of the continent, featuring mateship, hard work and perseverance, and encompassing democracy and aspects of the British legal system (Lencznarowicz 2005; Rickard 1996; Furniss 2005). There were also many arguments postulating that Australia in fact did not have any characteristic national identity. In either case, the Aboriginal people were nowhere to be seen, as a component of either official culture or as an identity. If they were mentioned, it was mostly as a disappearing race or conquered people, or as a silenced and repressed people, who, living on the social and economic margins of Australian society and culturally destroyed, now served as a source of guilt for many white Australians (Morgan 678).

### **1. Historical Context**

The present predicament of white Australians should be understood in the context of the settler state or nation that Australia is referred to, along with the United

States, Canada and New Zealand. Such a state was built as a result of conquering indigenous peoples and their land, often referred to as ‘unoccupied,’ i.e. *terra nullius*, because it was not cultivated by the indigenous population (Rose, Davis, and Furniss 2005). These states built their countries and identities as a result of “domination and conquest, subordination of the [indigenous] population and nature as well as a victory of progress, civilization and will of God” and the “triumph of such values as self-reliance, democracy, competition and freedom” (Furniss 9). This is the frontier myth narrative – explaining the process of establishing settler societies – first formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 with reference to American state and society. Since it perfectly grasps the essence of colonial invasion, it can be applied to settler colonialism exercised by Britain in its dominions (see Patrick Wolfe 1999). Analogically, this master narrative can also work in the settler Australian society,<sup>1</sup> in which the Aboriginal people feature as primitive savages and brutes, a stumbling block in the path of progress; thus they had to be removed through cultural assimilation or elimination. Judging by the small numbers of the present indigenous population in these countries (in comparison with those at the point of contact; however, recently their number has been increasing in Australia), it is evident what happened: they were eliminated through conquest, murder, disease, mistreatment on the frontier zone (by convicts or settlers who came from different European nations, though in the case of Australia, predominantly from Britain or Ireland), or later instituted by the Australian governments through forced assimilation or protection, with the latter based on isolation, which kept them apart from the white society on the reserve. In the case of Australia, those Aborigines who were not eliminated were made invisible by being placed not only on reserves, but also in missions or outstations. Additionally, they were subjected to the provisions of the White Australia policies that were in operation on the federal level from 1901 through the 1960s, yet before that time such policies had been also applied by colonial governments. This master narrative was part of a theory of history in which “the conflict, violence and subjugation of nature and indigenous people are legitimated as natural and inevitable for ensuring progress of civilization” (Furniss 29). The indigenous population was hence seen as a somewhat necessary victim to obtain “progress” in the new continent; a victim of white people, who, however, as Anthony Morgan suggests, cannot be held to moral account because they were part of “an inexorable movement” (686) advocating progress. A larger context for this movement also comprises 19<sup>th</sup> century environmental determinism, social Darwinism and cultural evolutionism, which put Anglo-Saxon civilization at the top of any ladder in settler society.

These forces started to weaken and eventually ceased to operate after World War II, when people and states were more concerned with “race, women’s rights, Indigenous peoples’ rights, multiculturalism, environmentalism” (Furniss 27). This is when the frontier myth theory was replaced by the New Western History pioneered by Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White and Donald Worster, all

of whom advocated a new approach to the West and its history, thereby rejecting the frontier theory as the main factor shaping the history of colonized continents. They emphasized the diversity of historical experience and the need to recover the voices of ordinary people often ignored by nationalist historical studies, including those of the Aboriginal population of Australia.

Those for whom the frontier myth is a foundation myth and who see Australia as an ethnic nation with Britishness and a British legacy as its core, and for whom the major threat to its identity comes from Asian countries, support the master narrative of victimization that necessitates not passive endurance, but an ongoing, aggressive battle for survival. Ann Curthoys in her "Entangled Histories" explains that the story "begins with the tale of convicts suffering, of pioneers who had to endure the harshest continent on earth, endless drought or flood near starvation." She goes on to say that the story also includes tales of war, their use as war fodder for the British military in Africa and in both world wars, a result of which death in war is glorified and upheld as the ultimate nationalistic sacrifice" (Curthoys after Furniss 52). For supporters of this narrative<sup>2</sup> (among them supporters of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party),<sup>3</sup> victimization "comes from within, from Aborigines who are aggressors inflicting violence on the innocent settler and his family" (Furniss 36). The nationalistic rhetoric also contains undertones of anti-native entitlement, as some fear that the pastoral land will be taken over by Aboriginal Australians and, due to their high birth rate, that Aboriginal Australians will start to dominate in numbers.

For those who reject the frontier theory, all settler societies have been facing similar troubles: how to create or even imagine one identity out of so many different categories of settlers (from the point of view of ethnicity, race, class) involved in colonizing the continents? How can we rationalize and legitimize the policy of the mistreatment of the indigenous population and their dispossession from the lands? How are we to imagine the new relations and the place of the indigenous people in contemporary situations, especially now when they are reclaiming their identities and land or rather building one overarching Aboriginal identity? How can we maintain the integrity of one nation and one state when counter narratives concocted by each subjugated group undermine the master narrative that produced cohesion of the state and the nation?

The policy on how to deal with these questions and the post-colonial legacy greatly divides Australians. Anthony Morgan, in his article "The Psychodynamics of Australian Settler Nationalism: Assimilating or Reconciling With the Aborigines," suggests an existence of two models of settler nationalism – assimilationist and indigenizing "that compete to organize national reality, including relations between the settler and indigenous population" (667). Both are rooted in different views of the nation, feelings about the past, and understanding national subjectivity, and both are presently competing on different levels. For the assimilationist state nationalism, any changes – in the law from an assimilationist policy to

a self-determination policy or in the role the indigenous population as well as other minorities play in all walks of life – are a source of anxiety about national identity, evidently endangered by the policy of multiculturalism or marred by the shame or guilt in relation to events from the past. The other approach of the indigenizing state nationalism “welcome[s] and promote[s] changes to Australian national identity and government policy [...] to improve relations between settler indigenous communities” (Morgan 682). Its supporters claim that the contentious issues should be discussed and confronted, not dismissed, including the issue of how to teach national history (Clark 2008). They, i.e. lawyers, politicians, and activists, are all involved in many symbolic and practical actions to promote multiculturalism, reconciliation and the inclusion of minorities hitherto excluded from British-based identity, but they are warned that their actions will lead to the decay of national identity and pride.

Both groups seem to approve Cathy Freeman’s symbolic act of lighting the flame at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, a woman who has since been perceived as a representation of cultural diversity and the birth of a new national character on the path to reconciliation. For many, she would symbolize the moment of the inclusion of the hitherto excluded Indigenous population of Australia as well as other minorities in the narrative about Australia’s history; thus, she signalled the start of multicultural Australia, which declaratively happened in 1973 under the Whitlam government, and since then has been further reiterated in official papers and in the political scene through a number of pieces of legislation.<sup>4</sup> The proposition I put forward in the paper asserts that the field which illustrates the inclusion of Australia’s indigenous population and culture into Australian society and culture is Aboriginal visual art.<sup>5</sup> In this field we can notice a wide acceptance of Aboriginal artists as Australians and wide appreciation of their art works as representing Australian art or even embodying it, as, since 2002, “it has been displayed along the non-indigenous art, enabling a more holistic appreciation of the art history of Australia” (Grishin vi). What gives credence to this suggestion is not only the high number of Aboriginal people engaged in art [approximately 6,000 to 7,000 (McCulloch and McCulloch 2)] or the high numbers of their works sold, but also its anteriority to Europe-based Australian art production and its long presence there. This presence has been shown in the artworks made by colonial artists in response to meeting Aboriginal people: not only in the themes of the colonists’ artworks but also in their stylistic borrowings from Aboriginal art.

The reasons for thus mentioned absence were very diverse, starting from cultural blindness to the so-called primitive art, then often classified as ethnographic pieces. Yet, as will be presented later, individual European colonists or convicts took interest in Aboriginal visual art in such forms as rock art, bark painting or sand and body painting. Yet these first mentions were ignored in the art history books until the 1930s, and, likewise, not prominently remembered by Australians at large. Moreover, the very characteristics of Aboriginal art could also make

it difficult, if possible at all, for Europeans to perceive, categorize and identify certain objects as works of art. For instance, Aboriginal art had (and still has, albeit to a much lesser extent) a religious and communal, not individual, nature, and it played a central role in the spiritual life of Indigenous communities and in their sustenance. In its creation the stress was put on the performance rather than the final effect, on creativity, not a final result (Walsh 97). During the last two decades, Aboriginal visual art has gained a very special status in Australian art; in fact, it has nearly become its flagship, with many of the Aboriginal artists attaining international recognition as Aboriginal Australians, artists such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Its incorporation into Australian art may paradoxically signal some disadvantage for the Aboriginal art. Michael Walsh expresses it in the following way: “this integration may mean the loss of [Aboriginal] identity, the loss of urge to express those essential relationship between humankind and the land that is at the very root of what is to be an Aboriginal Australian” (101).

## 2. Definition of Identity

In the present analysis, the definition of national identity developed by Anthony D. Smith will be adopted. As representative of ethno-symbolism in the study of modern nationalism, he opts for the view that symbols, myths, values and traditions, including local traditions are instrumental in creation and persistence of modern nation states. He is also a supporter of the non-primordial approach to nation, which emphasizes that nations or *ethnies* (his term for ethnic communities) are formed and constructed, not static; that they are in a state of flux, where some elements tend to disappear while others enter it, sometimes taking a significant place. In this modern approach to nations and nationalism Smith highlights two elements: social engineering and technical innovation, which allow for a creation of new narratives and new cultural artefacts under the influence of imagination and novel skills made possible by technological inventions (86). This definition seems to fit the line of reasoning that in a changing, inclusive identity nature of a nation, which is often composed of different ethnic groups (*ethnies*), with the passage of time, due to different circumstances the traditions, symbols, or values of different *ethnies* are reselected and arranged in a different way.

His definition presented in his book *Nationalism. Theory, Ideology, History* (2010) reads as follows: “National identity is the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths, memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural elements” (20). Crucial to the definition are the words “reproduction” and “reinterpretation,” which imply that national identity

can be refashioned. What was once excluded from it, due to changing circumstances (or as Foucault would put it, a change in the operating forces of power), can be incorporated into it. After the conquest of Australia by the British the indigenous peoples of Australia were pushed to the margins of Australian society and in the newly built narrative of the continent were made invisible: their myths, stories, traditions and values hidden, or their voice muffled or silenced for almost 200 years.<sup>6</sup> The reason for that was that the western or British colonial mindset prevailed, based on the conviction of the superiority of western civilization; now, when cultures are perceived as distinct, not higher or lower, the status of the indigenous populations and their cultures is being reconsidered. Smith expresses this in the following way:

This process of ethno-symbolic reconstruction involves the reselection, recombination and recodification of previously existing values, symbols and memories and the like, as well as the addition of new cultural elements by each new generation. Thus the 'heroic vision' of national identity [...] may, in the next generation, cede place to a more open, pragmatic and utilitarian version of the nation's identity, stressing such themes as entrepreneurial ability, organizational skills and tolerance and diversity, themes that can be traced back to alternative ethnic traditions in the nation's history. (22)

In this newly fashioned Australian identity, especially from the point of view of the indigenizing nationalism, the memory of one indigenous, 'ethnic,' tradition is being revoked and reconsidered to make room for one more narrative about this continent's history. The tradition in question is the Aboriginal tradition, rooted in the culture of the continent, in which (because of 'Dreamtime')<sup>7</sup> visual art has been an indispensable element constituting the culture.

### 3. Australian Aboriginal Art: History of Its Presentation and Presence

First, Australian Art as such is not monolithic, though it is dominated by the European tradition and was seen through a European lens until 1990. It is actually multi-layered and diverse, consisting both of European-driven art forms, indigenous art, and recently Asian driven art forms. In a book *Australian Art: History*, by Sasha Grishin, the author also says that it "has been created as a result of a dialogue between the Aboriginal Art and the Australian European Art" (x) since the first point of contact. With this book Grishin 'as if' answers a call for an adequate account of Aboriginal art voiced in 2005 by Susan Lowish in "European Vision and Aboriginal Art: Blindness and Insight in the Work of Bernard Smith."<sup>8</sup> After reassessing art history books that appeared up until 2014, she observed that art historians had a problem adequately presenting the existence of Aboriginal art as they usually focused on the differences and did not look for interactions. They

instead searched for deficiencies in such art and mostly drew the conclusion that Aboriginal people, as savages, were incapable of producing true art. Grishin, on the other hand, emphasized the interactions between Indigenous people and settler societies that were taking place throughout centuries in the field of art production; thus, he concocted a different narrative of the continent's art history by reinterpreting the available artistic material. The changing nature of Aboriginal art has also been noticed. Howard Morphy observes: "[...] the recent history of Aboriginal Art has been a dialogue with colonial history in which what came before as Aboriginal history of Australia with its emphasis on the affective social and spiritual relationship to the land, is continually asserting itself over what exists in the present" (qtd. in Walsh 98). A reciprocal action between these two cultures and art traditions started from the point of their first contact.

Aboriginal art is said to be an ancient continuous tradition dating back to 40,000 years ago, with its rock art representations of Wandinjas,<sup>9</sup> X-ray paintings of animals, and Mimih<sup>10</sup> as the oldest examples of this art. The artistic achievements were noticed by the first European explorers, as already in 1803 William Westall "sketched a series of figures painted in a rock shelter on Chasm Island, off Groote Eylandt (Walsh 98). However, the captains and artists present on the first ships that reached Australia in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century did not take an interest in those "rude drawings" or did not offer accurate accounts of them. The first discussion of this ancient art was led by the anthropologist George Grey in 1830, and it seems to have affected further reception of this art by Europeans. On the basis of his research of rock art, he concluded that the art forms must have been done by superior people, probably former European visitors or Makassans. That land, he claimed, was populated by savage people who were not capable of executing such abstract art (Grishin 4). Such a view prevailed even in 1934, when William Moore in his *Story of Australian Art* attributed the Wandjina to outside sources. Grishin succinctly remarks that "the 19<sup>th</sup> century analysis of Aboriginal Art were rooted in the prejudice of the time so that the European response to indigenous art was at best misguided interpretation and at worst deliberate fraud that denied a people's ability to create art" (33).

Such a view was predominant and circulated in spite of the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century quite a number of European anthropologists collected pieces produced in Arnhem Land by the Aboriginal peoples as part of their ceremonies and traditions, and that a host of Aboriginal men were involved in painting, drawing and selling their artworks, which were avidly bought. One notable was William Barak (1824–1903), a Wurundjeri artist, producing gouaches, watercolours, and drawings in which he presented the rituals and ceremonies of his tribe, the Yaraa Yaraa people who lived near Melbourne. At the time, the rituals were suppressed in Victoria. In his paintings we can see distinctive features of his art: painting in bands and drawing mostly silhouetted figures in possum skin-cloaks taking part in corroboree. His contemporary was Tommy McRae, a painter from that area as



well, who became especially famous for drawing the story of William Buckley. Buckley was a convict who escaped in 1803 and settled among the Wada Wurrungi People and lived with them for 32 years, during which he learnt their language, observed their ceremonies and even adapted to their way of life. His experience serves as a testament to the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Europeans and Aborigines. In 1835 he surrendered to white people when he encountered them through happenstance and was subsequently pardoned. He spent the rest of his life with white people, first offering great service as a cultural and language translator. At the end of his life, when interviewed by the journalist John Morgan, he described the people who gave him hiding as “generally treacherous, cowardly, and mere creatures holding the link in the chain of animal life between the man and the monkey” (Morgan 1812–1815). Whether this was true or invented to please the public and thus earn money, it is hard to say, but it definitely fitted the frame of mind of white Australians at the time, who readily accepted the explanation.

Both Barak and McRae were mentioned, along a few other Aboriginal painters of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Mickey of Ulladulla, a Dhurga man), in *Art of the Australian Aboriginal* by Robert Croll (published in 1943) and their works were shown previously in an exhibition of Australian Art in New York in 1941 (Grishin 22). It is worth stressing that the works were referred to as Australian Aboriginal art, thus acknowledging them as Australian artists. Yet these two artists did not bring about much change in the perception and thinking of the indigenous population, whose political and social situation in Australia was deteriorating due to the overarching understanding of indigenous cultures as primitive, savage, and degenerate, and thus meant to vanish. These painters were excluded from the narrative of a newly fledgling Australia and as a component of the then Australian identity offered by contemporary writers and painters, among others, by the renowned Heidelberg school,<sup>11</sup> and, later, by some modernists painters.

In the field of painting this policy was a continuation of a long tradition of representing the Aboriginal people through the European lens and for European purposes, either as Noble or primitive. These can be seen through the art of the colonial Port Jackson Painter (unknown colourist active at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Sydney), who rendered the Aboriginal people, showing white dabs on their bodies as well as by a palette of Aboriginal colours (i.e. mixtures of red, ochre, charcoal black) and that of Richard Browne (1771–1824), an Irish convict who painted stylized figures of the Aborigines and their marine activities. The latter was well known for following a theory of phrenology authored by Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801), according to which indigenous people had physical characteristics which predetermined them to be cruel, backwards and barbaric. Other physical characteristics allegedly proving that they were imbecilic, immature, stupid and weak were indicated by their “projecting foreheads, eyes that in profile run parallel with the nose and arched noses turned down” (Grishin 58). His silhouetted portraits represented the prejudices of the days, and as such provided

and sustained an explanation for the abuse of the Aboriginal people during the periods of colonization, the gold rush and the later settlement of inland areas. These paintings were small in size and quite inexpensive; they were thus widely distributed and commonly available and they largely determined the representation of the Aboriginal people for almost a century. They also fitted into the Darwinian theory of the development of civilizations, which placed the Aborigines at the bottom rung of the ladder of developed societies.

The European lens in depicting Aboriginal people can be also seen in artworks of such colonial painters Sydney Parkinson, Thomas Watling, Augustus Earl, John Glover, Benjamin Deterrau, just to name a few, where they were shown as either heroic Roman gladiators defending their country (e.g. Parkinson's "Two of the Natives of New Holland, Advancing to Combat" 1770s) or pure and perfect elements of nature (e.g. Glover's "Corrobory of Natives"). Their depictions were romanticized, contrived, and impersonal, showing Aboriginal people as elements of nature and landscape, just as animals and plants, which shows a tendency to eliminate them from the realm of civilization, unless they civilize as in the representations of J. M. Crossland, ("Nunnuntera"), Augustus Earle's "Bungaree," or Robert Dowling's "Masters George, William, and Miss Harriet Ware with the Aborigine Jamie Ware."

The first signs of a different approach to the Aboriginal people as creators of art appeared in the 1930s, which was partly initiated by the modernist movement represented by Margaret Preston, a leading modernist painter, who in her 1942 article "Art in Post-War," postulated the development of a national Australian culture through an exchange of ideas of indigenous and non-indigenous artists (Otton and Muir 1981). She herself painted a number of paintings inspired by indigenous art, employing the indigenous depiction of dabs of white paint and white dots, of landscapes as seen from above, and earthy colours, as in her painting "Flying over the Shaohaven River." Despite her enthusiastic approach to Aboriginal art, she still maintained a patronizing European view of Aboriginal people (Grishin 226).

Contemporaneous to this appeal of modernists was a new trend that developed in the 1940s and picked up momentum in the 1960s due to anthropologists and ethnographers, who took to collecting indigenous artworks: bark paintings, sculptures, or watercolours. Lectures, writings and visits of non-indigenous artists to Arnhem Land dating from the 1940s led to discussions about the types and role of Aboriginal imagery. One of the first pioneers of this trend was Charles P. Mountford (1890–1976), an anthropologist and photographer, who commissioned people in Ernabella to record traditional images on paper and crayon. He was followed by Catherine (1918–1994) and Roland Berndt, who also encouraged peoples of the Arnhem Land to record Arnhem designs, using western media. The most notable in this respect are artists Rex Battarbee and John Gardner who, in 1936 and 1938 respectively, exposed their watercolours to the Aboriginal Arrernte

people of the desert area, among whom was the most famous Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira. Before meeting the two artists he was already known for his artistic talent. He had made small depictions of everyday life around him, i.e. boomerangs or woomerangs as well as mulga-wood plaques with poker-worked designs (He turned to be exceptional pupil of both, for in two weeks he absorbed all the secrets of water colour landscape painting (Grishin 275). Namatjira himself held his first solo exhibition in 1938 and continued painting while encouraging other members of his tribe to paint. He and his wife were the first Aborigines to receive Australian citizenship in 1957. Also, to a degree through his imprisonment and death, he paved the way to wider recognition of indigenous people as artists and later to their political enfranchisement. Grishin states that “the most significant heritage of Namatjira was his challenge to the stereotype of the Aboriginal artist as a backward savage who was incapable of making anything that went beyond traditional decorated artifacts” (279).

There are some other examples of a successful cross-cultural cooperation between an Australian and Aboriginal artists, for example Dick Roughsey (1920–1985), from Lardil tribe in the Mornington Island and an airline pilot and artist Percy Treize. Another couple was Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels (1936–2004), from Warlpiri people in Yuendumu, in Northern Territory, and Anne Mosey (Walsh 101). Due to the collaboration, the Aboriginal artists obtained some material support, exposure to European art and, most importantly, encouragement to continue Aboriginal artistic expression as part of the communal culture, for which some market was secured.

Still another example of a successful artistic enterprise is the Papunya School which emerged in the 1970s, a school perhaps on par with the world-renowned Hermannsburg School. From this moment, the presence of the Aboriginal people in the public sphere and Australian consciousness has been more pronounced, and perhaps this is where the revival of Aboriginal painting truly began. We can link this revival to two events. The first event was the referendum of 1967, which made history because Australian people voted to amend the Constitution to include Aboriginal people into the census and thus create laws for them (Jupp 19). This event in the public space was marked by an artistic gesture: handing in bark petitions. The bark petitions of 1963 were presented in parliament and are thus seen as the first official recognition of the Aboriginal people in Australian law. A subsequent event was the 1972 transfer of land rights to the Aboriginal people, which enhanced their desire to artistically display their bond to the land. According to Elazar Barkan, author of *The Guilt of Nations*, Australia openly recognized in the 1970s that “Aboriginal culture has been inextricably linked to Australian culture.” All the aforementioned events, Barkan writes, have led “to the plans of restitution, reconciliation, retribution and a new answer to a question “What is Australia?” (234).

Instrumental in answering this question is the role of Aboriginal art in Australian art. If we accept after Tom Griffiths that the “history of Australia is

the anatomy of silence<sup>12</sup> and of ‘white noise’ generated by European settlement” (Griffiths 3), then a new narrative of the history is written when the silence about the status of indigenous art is broken. This silence, if some still had not yet heard about the Namatjira and the Hermannsburg School, was shattered with a bang by the establishment of the Papunya school in the desert. Early in 1971 Geoffrey Bardon (1940–2003) encouraged children and then adults of five different peoples relocated there from their original homelands, to paint their traditional stories and designs. In this way the most famous Australian mural was created. The previous steps mentioned before were important, but this school acted “as a catalyst, and Geoffrey Bardon as a midwife of the contemporary art movement” (Wroth 2014). In spite of the previous courageous steps taken by the Labor Government, the 1970s were still a time when the Aboriginal people were moved places so that they could be assimilated into the culture of white people and to wean them off their aboriginal culture, including the habit of producing paintings as part of a ritual. Thus, by encouraging the Aboriginal people to practice their traditional ways and to re-establish metaphorically their connection to the land, Bardon was acting against the grain; the reluctance of the administration to give money or any kind of material support to Aboriginal artists to produce art – buying paints and canvases to market their artistic production – is proof that Bardon rankled such authorities. In order to counter such obstacles, Papunya Tula Artist Limited was established in November 1972, and it played a major role in popularizing this art in form of acrylic paintings, advertising it and selling it to growing numbers of enthusiasts.

All this coincided with the emergence of the abstract art movement, and the activity of such famous abstract artists as Tony Tuckson and Ion Fairweather, who had already organized exhibitions of Aboriginal art dating back from the 1950s up until the 1970s, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Some of the collections from the exhibitions went on a tour across Australia, thanks to which they were exposed to a wider audience that generally showed acceptance and appreciation. Tuckson was to say the that “We [i.e. Australians] have a rich heritage, yet much part of it is neglected. It is not ours but with years it will have a much greater bearing on our Australian art” (Grishin 7).

These were prophetic words, for in the years to come more and more Aboriginal artists – old and young, those living in the outback and those living in the city – achieved international fame. The artists so far mentioned are just a few of other widely recognized names. In its catalogue, the NSW Gallery wrote that Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarr “like Albert Namatjira before him [...] blazed a trail for future generations of Indigenous artists; bridging the gap between Aboriginal art and contemporary Australian art” (Guringai Festival). Similarly, Emily Kngwarreye, a woman artist who took to painting at a very old age, well into her 80s, tried many styles, beginning from the famous batik school in Utopia, but gained fame with her gestural paintings that have been compared to those of Wilhelm

de Kooning, Jackson Pollock or Claude Monet, which showed stripes of thick lines, probably representing yam tracks.

## Conclusion

Many, including Anthony Morgan, would say that Cathy Freeman is the symbol of cultural diversity and the new national character of Australia, as sports is a domain inseparably linked with Australian identity. But it can be safely said that in numbers, through its excellence, and in its continuity and duration, the symbol of a new Australian national identity, or more precisely a newly unveiled element of Australian identity, is Aboriginal art. Due to the slow recognition of the culture and talents of the indigenous population of Australia, Aboriginal Australians and their culture were erased for centuries and have made forays into the culture of Australia only quite recently, yet they have already indelibly put their stamp on it, and this mark is still evolving. What needs to be remembered is that in spite of the White Australia policy, Australia and its identity were never white, but only presented as being so, and never really separate from, but in a relationship (often a difficult one) with other racial or ethnic groups, including the Aboriginal people and Asians. It is often the latter group that was the target of the ardent white policy for political and economic reasons. By reselection, recombination and the recodification of Aboriginal artworks retrieved from the past, an alternative story of Australia is being written, one that is a manifestation of its new and changing identity. It is still a declarative identity, as practice shows, but this New Australia is on the horizon. And it features dots and dabs as well as meandering lines.

## Notes

- 1 However, there are some significant differences between American and Australian frontier myths, or their conceptualizations, underlined already by R. Ward in his *The Australian Legend*; see also G. Davison's "Frontier" in: *Oxford Companion to Australian History*. 269–270.
- 2 The 'black-armband' version of Australian history, and K. Windschuttle's attacks on mainstream historiography (e.g. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*).
- 3 Other examples contain Professor Blainey's critique of the 'black-armband' version of Australian history, and K. Windschuttle's attacks on mainstream historiography (e.g. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*).
- 4 There is a long list of initiatives undertaken after the period of reawakening of the 1970s or events that took place before and after, which included, among

- others, Tent Embassy, findings of the Commission of Inquiry, the land rights campaign initiated by Mabo case of 1992 and Wiki case of 1996.
- 5 It should however be pointed out for the Indigenous Australians visual art has always been inextricably intertwined with music, dance and storytelling.
  - 6 It may be noted yet that during the bicentennial celebrations in 1988 the ‘indigenous’ aspect was already very prominent.
  - 7 Also referred to as Dreaming – a term used to refer to Aboriginal cosmology, encompassing the creator and ancestral beings, the laws of religious and social behaviour, the land, the spiritual forces which sustain life and the narratives which concern these (Caruana 254).
  - 8 Bernard Smith (1916–2011) was one of the most prominent Australian art historians, author of *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788*.
  - 9 Wandjinas – generic term for a group of ancestral beings in the Kimberley, who control the elements and maintain fertility in humans and in other natural species (Caruana 254).
  - 10 Mimih – spirit figures that appear depicted on the rock walls of West Arnhem Land and Kakadu, it also refers to the style of painting which incorporates images of these spirits (Caruana 254).
  - 11 It was an Australian art movement in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that promoted Australian landscape and nationalism.
  - 12 The Great Australian Silence is defined by the anthropologists W. E. H. Stanner as “the habit of white Australians to deny the violence of the frontier” (Griffiths 2).

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