

Aboriginal art, abstraction, and Matthys Gerber’s painted power pole in Brisbane

David Pestorius



Matthys Gerber
Pole 2006
painted timber
Courtesy David Pestorius Projects, Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner
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In 1998, when Papunya Tula artist George Tjungurrayi’s painting *Tingari Dreaming* (1996) was first exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne, Aboriginal art turned again. With his work, Tjungurrayi painted the desert reborn, and he seemed to do so completely in step with the recent history of western abstraction. A large monochromatic painting in horizontal format, *Tingari Dreaming*’s overall purple gestalt pulses at us a mesmerising linear current with mysterious deflections at its lateral extremes. Here was a work that could sit comfortably alongside anything by the leading exponents of western abstraction – a point that the NGV, then under the direction of Timothy Potts, sought to emphasise. It did so by hanging the work in a prominent location adjacent to *Constructive Painting* (1950) by the Sydney pioneer of abstraction Ralph Balson. It is a conjunction that continues to ripple through Australian art today.

But even at the time Australia’s non-Indigenous artists were responding to this efflorescence in the desert, a blooming confirmed in 2000 by the remarkable *Papunya Tula: Genesis and genius* exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Among the most engaged by this renewal were the Sydney artists A.D.S. Donaldson, Elizabeth Pulie and Matthys Gerber, and the Melbourne artists Gary Wilson, Melinda Harper, Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley. Of course, artists in Sydney have always engaged with Indigenous art, with the early filmic experiments of Len Lye, Margaret Preston’s call for a national art based on Aboriginal art, the paintings of Balson and his student Tony Tuckson, Ant Farm’s Dolphin Embassy, and Tim Johnson’s Radio Birdman project and related collaborations with Papunya painters in the early 1980s being only some of the most notable examples. By the late 1990s, Tjungurrayi’s paintings challenged another generation and, as I have written elsewhere, spoke of a common future, at once aesthetic but also somehow social.¹

Matthys Gerber first rose to this challenge in 2002 when invited to participate in an exhibition devoted specifically to figurative painting.² His subversive response was to paint oversized portraits of three artists whose abstract paintings he admired: Gary Wilson, co-founder of the now legendary Melbourne artist-run space Store 5; the Swiss conceptualist Olivier Mosset; and Tjungurrayi (p.167). Based on projected photographs, Gerber’s portraits are characterised by large flat expanses of primary and secondary colour, his subjects barely recognisable in the psychedelic glare and then only when the viewer stands back from the canvas. Up close, as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman taught us to look at their large-scale abstract paintings, Gerber’s works are indeed wholly abstract, although from other positions they can be understood differently. Thus, in conflating the antithetical genres of portraiture and abstraction, Gerber reminds us that there are different ways

of seeing the same thing, while his conceit of bringing the local, the international and the desert into alignment is precisely the possibility suggested by Tjungurrayi’s painting.

In December 2006 I organised a large ‘outdoor show’ on the University of Queensland’s expansive Brisbane campus.³ Titled *Turrbal-Jagera* after the two Aboriginal tribes that occupied the Brisbane area prior to colonisation, the show included contributions from more than 30 artists and other cultural producers. The most elaborate and interconnected of the various clusters of space-related interventions in *Turrbal-Jagera* comprised a large signage piece by the Vienna-based artist Heimo Zobernig, an aleatory road painting by Düsseldorf artist Leni Hoffmann, and a brightly painted power pole by Gerber titled *Pole*.



Leni Hoffmann
cbe 2006
plasticine on road surface
Courtesy David Pestorius Projects, Brisbane
Photo: Manuel Franke

Between 2005 and 2008 Gerber made three painted power poles and, like his portraits, they are an important contribution to what A.D.S. Donaldson has referred to as the ‘continually evolving dynamic between the work of contemporary abstract painters and that of Indigenous Australian artists’.⁴ In my view, the poles are a joyous contemporary response to the burial poles of Aboriginal people in Central Arnhem Land. As with all of Gerber’s work, however, *Pole* is informed by a range of cultural references; the work of Danish artist Poul Gernes, Romanian artist André Cadere and French artist Guy de Rougemont, for example, being of equal significance to Gerber as more ancient and mundane sources. In the end, what are important are the overlaps, synchronicities and new meanings that these references generate.

All of this begs the question: Where is Donaldson’s continually evolving dynamic today, at a time when Aboriginal art seems to have lost some of its shine? Perhaps the answer lies in another work in *Turrbal-Jagera*: namely, *Maɪwar Performance* (2006–), an ongoing collaboration between Dave Hullfish Bailey, a Los Angeles artist with Native American ancestry, and Brisbane Aboriginal activist and playwright Sam Watson. As part of this periodically recurring performance, which is structured around the unannounced deflection of Brisbane’s popular CityCat ferries, Watson unfurls a large Aboriginal flag in view of the boats’ passengers. The effect of this intervention, as Rex Butler has written, is that the ‘seeming inevitability of the European occupation of Australia is paused for a moment, allowing us to dream of different outcomes’.⁵ But the deflection of the CityCats also recalls those other deflections, the ones that mysteriously inhabit the paintings of George Tjungurrayi, and the optical dynamism of Gerber’s *Pole*, which seems to turn as we pass by it when in fact we are the ones moving and not it. All of these works speak of contesting entrenched positions, challenging conventions, and change.

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1. A.D.S. Donaldson & David Pestorius, ‘Yesterday, today and tomorrow: Abstract art & Australia’, in *Volume one: MCA collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2012, p.78.
 2. *It’s a Beautiful Day: New Painting in Australia: 2*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 6 July–6 October 2002.
 3. *Turrbal-Jagera: The University of Queensland Art Projects 2006*, David Pestorius Projects, Brisbane & University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 2–17 December 2006.
 4. Donaldson quoted in Alejandra Szczepaniak, ‘Last word: A.D.S. Donaldson’, *Look*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2001.
 5. Rex Butler, ‘Dave Hullfish Bailey’, *Artforum*, vol. XLVIII, no.1, September 2009.



Dave Hullfish Bailey and Sam Watson
Maɪwar Performance 2006
performance view
Courtesy David Pestorius Projects, Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner



Heimo Zobernig
Untitled 2006
polystyrene, scaffolding
Courtesy David Pestorius Projects, Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner