

the honey ant of Kaapa

Tjampitjimpa

by eamon byrne

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I'VE BEEN looking through books of paintings and I've been thinking again about something which shouldn't surprise me, even if it always does. I've stared at the plates, and I've looked at the dates. Somewhere out in the bush — Papunya 1971. Old men hunched over bits of board, drawing circles in sand with sticks. I flip over the page and look at old Mick Tjakamarra looking back at me out of his old-time desert eyes. His face is fine and his skin is not yet really old though his hair is white and beneath the three furrows crossing his brow like marks on one of his paintings a deep sad light is coming out of his eyes as though someone else was looking out from within. I turn the page knowing that whenever I turn it back he'll still be there, the first important ceremonial man I ever met.

Art books can do that to you, make you think about things which never seem to change. I don't recommend looking too much into art books. After a while you start to write very tortuous sentences. That also can happen fast. Like fast painting out in the desert, changing all the time just as it did with Impressionism, even faster, in the space of two decades, or like modernism in its various guises between the two wars. That there are numerous twos in those examples doesn't make it any slower. The twoness of it is just a convenient symmetry in a universe only observable by eyes accustomed to seeking out order. I warned you about the tortuous sentences. It's as signs of order that we see change. But I intend to draw no further attention to that aphorism. To rationalise it further would be to spoil its simplicity. Art bounces off its innovators through the strokeplay of its imitators, the proselytising of its theorists, the dissemination of its promoters. It doesn't need only strokes for this to be so — dots will do just as well.[1]

I start with a date. Which date? This is already a problem. In 1971 a white man told a black man to scrub out a mark on a school wall. The mark had been meant to depict an ant, a white fella ant. But the white man was displeased with the mark and told the black man to make a different mark, a mark for a black fella ant. Then Kaapa Tjampitjimpa took a brush and painted what appeared to the white man to be a hieroglyph. It was, the white man was told, the mark for a honey ant. Some years later — the number is usually emphasised in art books to be surprisingly few — collectors in Vienna and Houston Texas would see these markings as signs of a new type of appreciable art currency and would begin referring to it by one of its catalogue names: western desert painting.

Whether this was the start of something new or just a continuation of something old could be debated at some length. We both know that some thousands of years earlier some ancient ceremonial man had punched a small hole into a rock face somewhere out in the vast and stunted mallee where the only shadow on the rock was cast by his own gaunt face. It could have even been at Papunya. There are stranger things. So the mark on the wall was something innate and natural, as words in a language are. It was only something curious to the eyes of the white man looking on, the white man who had given to the black man the brush and the paint, tools of *his* culture.

Then the date is, in a sense, arbitrary. It's either a point of departure or a point of continuation, and which one it is depends on where you stand, depends on your view of space and time. Possibly it is both. Possibly the world is too complex for anything to be unique, and if so there's no point in ascribing the quality of uniqueness to these markings, because you can't. All you can do is assert that they're derivative and imitative — of designs of forebears as much as of each other. The best you can say is that they partake of the property of all things to evolve and be organic. In other words to change. Even those markings etched in stone by Mick Tjakamarra's ceremonial ancestor.

Only that leads us into some sort of philosophical / aesthetic *kuruwarri*. [2] It's because we live in time that we see the significance in random events. We see things happening by miraculous chance, or linked with rational causes, and don't see that they simply *are*, that they've happened inevitably. One such event was Bardon's directive to avoid white fella imagery. So to the influence of timelessness we say was added the influence of a guru. But the paint, the brushes were *there*. The old myths, the symbols were *there*. Within three years, over a thousand combinations of them had been put down on bits of board, tiles, lids of biscuit tins by a large number of mostly old men. Within a further decade, distinctive styles had begun to evolve, enough to form an aesthetic. Prices jumped to keep up. The old men were dying. Women were joining in. The production was progressing to a near-western mode of fussy articulation. Art evolution had speeded up, like some unlikely rerun of the Italian renaissance compressed into a span of thirty years, self-referential, market-driven, inevitable. Who in an art theorist's dreamtime would have dreamt up *that*?

Art has its innovators; only later do we realise that art has its innovations. In the case of Kaapa's honey ant I can think of two. It was painted on a wall, and it made a fusion between the represented and its abstractions. After the first, Aboriginal art would be captured forever by the rectangle, and enter into a western paradigm. How ironic that western painting also began mainly on walls. The second meant that its symbols were neither one nor the other — or rather both at once. I would argue that Papunya art is not abstract because it represents symbols, and it is not representative because the symbols have themselves the quality of abstraction. However hard I look I cannot see the purely abstract language of Klee, the draping clocks of Dali, the parallel trees of Fred Williams. [3]

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I can't remember where I first saw a painting from Papunya. It might have been in a book, or hanging from a gallery wall. What is fairly certain is that I would have taken it to be a painting because it

had a squarish shape, and was contained within a border. I knew I was looking at symbols — well, markings anyway — although the significance of the framing escaped me. Had I been more prescient I might have wondered how the symbols might have looked in their previous incarnations, in sand and on stone. Only recently have I thought that they must have instantly entered into a new kind of timespace by having their dimensionality imposed upon by a different set of coordinates. I think now that Kaapa's first mark on Bardon's classroom wall was the birth placemoment itself and had the wall not been defaced by idiots it might now be in the forecourt of the ANG.[4] I concede of course that some might consider those idiots not to be idiots at all but saviours of the wall from a more invidious fate. Anyway, consider: colouration and dimensionality are only the context for symbols. In other contexts the symbols would be on spears, masks, bark scrolls in secondary anterooms of museums visited by few. Not that scrolls or symbols would care. But an irony also exists here. The bark paintings of Arnhem Land, truer types of an indigenous art, have their papyrus cousins in Cairo — both were unscrolled from the cylinders of plants and flattened out to rough rectangles. As walls replaced caves for Giotto's tempera, cotton replaced bark for Kaapa's ochre. Is this an instance of westernisation or standardisation, or some deeper mystery? The sheer, the spectacular naivety of those permutations of symbols in ersatz ochre had to lead to a tension between symbol and abstraction. So the circles, semi-circles, wavy lines, meandering tracks, animal footmarks are blown up within small fields as though zoomed in through a camera lens. Yet they are set in the earth, or at least in the earth's colours — black, yellow and brown red — where the primaries of blue and green are absent. There is no sky beneath which the symbols seem to have a hidden desire to be submerged from view, to be absorbed back into the earth. But whether this is an illusion of my eye or mind or the artist's hand I cannot say. Nor can the symbols themselves. For art is ignorant of its precursors. Only artists are sometimes not.

Notes:

1: A technique of applying dots of paint with sticks to create patterns.

2: Aboriginal word, meaning, in the context, something like *dilemma*.

3: A noted white Australian landscape painter.

4: Australian National Gallery

