

House of dreams: Translating Western Desert painting

How can a modern day Western audience hope to understand a way of painting that traces its origins to an ancient and unfamiliar Aboriginal hunter-gatherer belief system? This is the challenge of exhibiting Western Desert painting in Rome. The meaning of Western Desert painting, which is often cloaked in esoteric knowledge, secrecy, rumour and also deliberate obfuscation by the artists, can leave a Western audience feeling befuddled. How can we hope to translate such a foreign tongue? While many of us have also forgotten the esoteric iconography of our own classical art, we at least recognize in it traces of archetypal scenarios that are buried deeply in the language and mores of our inheritance. This is not the case with Western Desert art.

The usual response to this dilemma, which can be very rewarding, is to appreciate Aboriginal art on purely aesthetic terms: for its formal beauty and innovation, and also for the ways in which the sensible (aesthetic) faculty can make an exotic cosmology seem familiar, thus letting the foreign into our own realm, at least on the level of art.

However, this exhibition also aims to uncover possible meanings of Aboriginal art for our world beyond the aesthetic regime. We do not aim to uncover the knowledge systems that these paintings draw upon, which is too difficult a task. Rather, as we do with the literature and art of ancient Mediterranean traditions, we hope to see our own times in more original ways through the lens of these other worlds. In this way, Aboriginal art gains contemporary significance.

Our approach is to seek certain resonances between the two traditions that are not only aesthetic but also touch on their content. Thus we were very delighted by the invitation to develop an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal acrylic painting from the Sordello Missana collection for the Museo Bilotti, as it would bring together, in the same building, the art of two metaphysical systems. Giorgio de Chirico is the master of modern western metaphysical art. Aboriginal art is also deeply metaphysical. Its every empirical encounter with the world opens onto a much larger cosmological reality, called 'Dreaming'. The rare opportunity

to put these very different approaches to metaphysical painting in dialogue, we believe, enables us to see more clearly certain truths in both traditions.

Putting these two very different traditions into conversation is like attempting to translate utterly foreign languages. In the Western Desert such translation was first attempted in a substantial way a century ago, when the Lutheran missionary, Carl Strehlow, and several Arrernte elders, worked on a translation of parts of the Bible into Arrernte. Unpacking the finer points of metaphysical question hinges on the more subtle aspects of language. This conjunction between metaphysics, linguistics and translation provided an unexpected common ground between the leaders of these two traditions. It laid the foundation for a unique cross-cultural development that continues today long after the mission closed. It also illustrates Walter Benjamin's argument that we expand and deepen our own language through putting it into conversation with a foreign one, particularly one that is 'very remote' from our own, as then we are forced 'back to the primal elements of language itself ... to the point where work, image, and tone converge'.¹ In other words, it puts us into contact with deeply shared or universal aspects of poetic exchange.

To aid in the sorts of conversation that might be possible between these master metaphysicians, we have included, in the gallery adjacent to the de Chirico gallery, several works by another artist deeply preoccupied by the metaphysical, the Australian Imants Tillers. For over thirty years Tillers has been developing a conversation with both the paintings of de Chirico and contemporary Western Desert artists. In the same spirit we have also included a work each by Judy Watson and Christian Thompson, who are urban-based Aboriginal artists trained in Western art schools. Each makes work that translates an Aboriginal ethos into more familiar Western systems of representation. The translation that this entails is the actual subject of Thompson's work. In their art, as we hope will also occur in the conversations between de Chirico and Western Desert painting, both traditions are seen in a fresh light.

Conversing between Western Desert painting and de Chirico

A conversation between de Chirico and Western Desert painting might seem a far-fetched, even impossible, task. Firstly, each derives from very different traditions, histories, geographies and experiences. De Chirico's art descends from the high modernity of Europe, while Western Desert painting descends from an Australian hunter-gatherer economy. However, despite these contrasting histories, the global reach of modernity has swept them into a common trajectory.

Like de Chirico's paintings, the Western Desert acrylic paintings on canvas are made for the contemporary art market, not a hunter-gatherer economy. Even though the paintings resonate with the knowledge of an ancient culture, their manufacture is a direct response to the disruptions of modernity. In the Australian western and central deserts, where most of these paintings originate, these disruptions—in the form of the cattle industry, mining, missile testing and missionary activity—resulted in Aborigines often migrating hundreds of miles from their homelands to administrative centres fashioned according to the strictures of modernity.

Modernity was also an immensely disruptive force in Europe. It culminated in the catastrophe of World War One, which fractured the West's belief systems and, as the colonial wars did to Aborigines, announced a wholly new age in which the former power of tradition was irrevocably changed. The radical shift in de Chirico's style after 1920 can be read as a direct response to these events. In this respect his evocations of classical Western histories parallel the Western Desert artists' turn to their ancestral histories as a means to comprehend and heal the wounds of modernity. This is perhaps the most remarkable parallel between the two traditions, as if each was thrown into a shared metaphysics and also ethos of painting, which we might call neo-traditional, in order to adapt to the disruptions of modernity.

De Chirico's neo-traditionalism was part of a much wider Western mood, which encompassed not just his neo-classical bent—also seen, for example, in Picasso's post-war art—but the general avant-garde turn to traditional (i.e. non-modern) art of all kinds, including a widespread interest in indigenous art. If this is the moment that Western artists began a conversation with indigenous traditions, our conversation is more difficult because de Chirico is notable for his turn to the Western classical tradition, and not indigenous ones. However, the impetus is the same: the disruption of modernity and its severing of tradition. Hannah

Arendt observed:

This amazing revival, particularly of classical culture, which since the forties has been especially noticeable in relatively traditionless America, began in Europe in the twenties. There it was initiated by those who were most aware of the irreparability of the break in tradition.²

World War One irrevocably brought home the fatal impact of modernity on tradition. In artists such as de Chirico, neo-traditionalism was not simply nostalgic (there was no question of going back) but, insisted Arendt, geared to anchoring the unmoored present in 'its ancestral palace ... built with the oldest logoi'. Arendt was quoting Walter Benjamin, for whom 'the past is contained ineradicably' in an inherited language and logos (way of thinking), 'thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all'.

Like de Chirico, Benjamin's main critical tactic was quotation or appropriation, what he called 'drilling rather than excavating' the past, in order 'to plumb the depths of language and thought'. Here we find the first sketch of postmodern appropriation art, though tellingly, for our conversation, Arendt described it as 'the modern equivalent of ritual invocations', which in plucking ancient fragments from their original context, like words from sentences, 'brings truth to light'.

Arendt singled out Martin Heidegger as the principal philosopher of this post-modern way of being. Heidegger's insistence on 'listening to the tradition that does not give itself up to the past but thinks of the present', describes exactly the action of Aboriginal Dreaming. The Ancestral Beings did not just create the world once and then leave it to its own devices. Rather, Dreaming is more like evolution: it is an ever continuing event that shapes the present.

There is abundant evidence of widespread religious upheavals in Aboriginal society following the catastrophes of contact time (what Aborigines in some areas refer to as the 'killing times'). Whatever changes were wrought to the function of Dreaming during these times, today Aborigines listen to Dreaming in a thoroughly Heideggerean way that has deep echoes with de Chirico's neo-traditionalism: they do not give themselves up to the past but think of it in the present.

Even if we accept that the paintings of de Chirico and the Western Desert artists have much to talk about in their similar reactions to modernity, each speaks a very different pictorial language. There seems to be little common ground between de Chirico's heavily iconographic cityscapes and figurative landscapes, and the very abstract Western Desert paintings, other than their decorative sensibilities. Can then one be transla-

ted into the other?

The most obvious point for a would-be translator is that the abstraction of Western Desert painting is not foreign to Western modernism. Indeed, abstraction is often considered the quintessential modernist sensibility. In this respect Western Desert painting seems more overtly modernist than de Chirico's style. Further, like much Western abstraction, Western Desert painting is not a purely decorative schema but references the real world, and uses similar poetic devices of rhythm, colour, composition and pattern. While iconography played a significant role in earlier Western Desert painting, the more recent art, which is the focus of the Sordello Missana collection, generally eschews iconography for a completely abstract interpretation that evokes the ancestral energies and talismanic power of places and histories. Western Desert painting could be (and has been) compared to the art of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Like these classical Western modernists, Western Desert artists employ the material qualities of abstraction to arouse a heightened state of being. Their patterning is not simply for decorative effect but, like the rhythm and cadence of music, induces both reverie and a metaphysical presence. Indeed, music is generally an essential element of their work, with much of it based on song cycles owned by the artist. The paintings are sung—both in their production and reception.

Whatever the similarities and differences between the art of de Chirico and that of the western desert, their shared metaphysical content is their most meaningful point of contact. Whether this can be translated is a moot point. Benjamin maintains that no language is a stranger to another. This is because the efficacy of translation is not dependent on their historical kinship—that for example exists between the Latin languages—but on a deeper kinship that stems from the shared signifying purpose of all languages, as if they are 'fragments of a greater language',³ which the translator should release. This echo of an original or ancestral past, in which reverberates 'the central reciprocal relationship between languages',⁴ is precisely the metaphysics at play in this exhibition.

Dreamworks : De Chirico, Australia and metaphysical art

There are some unexpected links between de Chirico and Australia. Take de Chirico's only novel *Hebdomeros*. 'Yoking the several semantic connotations of "hebdomos"—associated with a festival of Apollo recurring on the seventh day of every month—'with "eros",⁵ the novel reads like an account of de Chirico's dream-world. Written and published in 1929 in French (which

was not his first language), it begins in an archetypal de Chirico setting: on a street soaked in a 'weary melancholy air, that particular dreary atmosphere one associates with Anglo-Saxon towns on Sundays.' Here *Hebdomeros* and his band of followers enter a 'strange building' that 'looked like a German consulate in Melbourne' (Australia). Wary of, but curious about, the apparitions that haunt its cavernous interior, soon they come upon several ghost-like figures:

a world apart; they knew nothing about anything; they had never heard of the war in the Transvaal or the disaster in Martinique; they did not recognize you, for they had never met you; nothing could disturb them.⁶

From this first hallucination we plunge headlong on a journey, sliding as if in a dream from one memory to the next.

'The idea that the building resembled a German consulate in Melbourne was a purely personal one of *Hebdomeros*.'⁷ A metaphor for his labyrinthine mind, this house of dreams was clearly meant to evoke a place in which the metaphysical mysteries of life unfold—thus the absurdity of a German consulate, an embassy of rationalism and planning, in the nether reasons. *Hebdomeros* recalled a childhood dream as he 'began to climb the stairs, which were very wide and made throughout of varnished wood.'

At the foot of the stairs on a little Doric column carved out of oak and joined to the end of the banister stood a polychrome statue, also carved in wood, representing a Californian Negro with his hands stretched above his head, holding aloft a gas lamp whose burner had an asbestos mantle over it.⁸

In this way, from the first pages, de Chirico collapses all worlds into a fluid timeless space that mocks modernity's linear historicism, and allows *Hebdomeros* to effortlessly slip into ancestral events as if they existed in a never-ending present. Wanting to evoke this state of being is perhaps the source of the obscure reference to the German consulate in Melbourne. Can we surmise from this that de Chirico was aware of the then legendary central Australian Arrernte, who had recently attracted the attention of the intelligentsia through a widely read anthropological text, making famous its authors, Baldwin Spencer, a professor at the University of Melbourne, and F. J. Gillen, his fieldworker, magistrate and sub-protector of the Aborigines at Alice Springs.⁹ The Dadaist Tristan Tzara had performed Arrernte songs from German translations made by a German missionary, who had published, in German, his own voluminous study of the Arrernte.¹⁰ In these accounts, the Arrernte embodied the mysterious beginnings of mankind. They were intensely studied by

the likes of Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim in the hope of uncovering the origins of human culture and revealing its secrets.

In this respect the meaning of the term 'Aborigines' has a particular resonance in Italy and also with de Chirico's fascination with its classical heritage. 'Aborigines' is a Latin word that means "the first ancestors of the Romans; the first inhabitants» (especially of Latium), possibly a tribal name, or from *ab origine*, literally «from the beginning.» In 1789, the year after Britain established a small penal colony on Cadigal country, now the CBD of Sydney, Europeans began using this Latin term as the name of indigenous inhabitants in its colonies. Language doesn't just describe the world it also brings new worlds and ideas into being. 'In the final analysis,' wrote Arendt—she was thinking of Benjamin—'all problems are linguistic problems.' In this case it creates a metaphorical affinity between the ancient Romans, who were colonized by the Greeks, and Australia's Aborigines, who were colonized by modern Europeans—an affinity that this exhibition seeks to elaborate.

Whatever the particular reason for de Chirico's allusion to Australia in his novel, no doubt it was, on a more general level, part of a widespread sense amongst his generation that the future lay in these nether regions, far from Europe's metropolises. However, such aspirations were aimed at refiguring Europe. Thus, soon after entering the Melbourne house of dreams, 'whose brightly lit ceilings conjure up visions of Dante's paradise,' Hebdomeros thought of those afternoons in Rome, when the games would be over for the day and the sun sinking lower in the sky, the immense canopy over the arena augmenting the evening shadows, and smells floating up from the sawdust and blood-soaked sand...¹¹

There is some irony in de Chirico glimpsing ancestral Rome in his Melbourne house of dreams, as Melbourne has since become an antipodean Italy. In 1929 he could not have known about the future influx of Italians into Australia after World War Two, which peaked in the decade of his death, in the 1970s. Today over 900,000 Australians identify themselves as having Italian ancestry, of which about 350,000 live in Melbourne—making Italian Melbourne about the size of Florence. And just as Rome is still alive with its ancestral memories of gladiators and 'blood-soaked sand,' so too is the Italian heart of Melbourne, the inner city area of Carlton, where Spencer laboured on his anthropological manuscripts in his university office, increasingly haunted by ancestral memories and its blood-soaked past.

De Chirico may have suggestively located his house of dreams in Melbourne, but there are very few of his paintings in Australian collections, and, with a few exceptions, his art has only indirectly influenced Australian artists. Nevertheless, the late nineteenth-century symbolist mood of Western art did impact on Australian artists, and, as in Europe, the aftermath of World War One sent Australians searching for an ancestral past, producing a distinctive metaphysical School of Australian art. These artists, many of them inspired by Spencer's accounts of his wanderings in Aboriginal Australia, sought inspiration in an archetypal metaphysical site, the desert and its Aboriginal art. Some, like de Chirico, turned to classical allusions, but his direct influence is most evident in the deserted townscapes of Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan and Jeffrey Smart (who until his recent death, was a long-time resident of Italy). The influence of de Chirico's is also evident in the metaphysical mysteries of another Australian long-time Italian resident, Ken Whisson, in whose painting, said one critic, 'we find ourselves reaching for some intangible truth that slips inexorably from our grasp'.¹² He could have been describing the art of de Chirico, or for that matter, any number of Western Desert artists.

De Chirico's major influence on Australian art occurred shortly after his death in the work of Imants Tillers, who is Australia's most important postmodernist artist. During the late 1970s and 80s Tillers' work was included in major exhibitions of contemporary art in America and Europe, including Documenta 7, the 1986 Venice Biennale, and the ICA (London). Tillers was and still is intensely interested in de Chirico's later (post-1920) work, which is featured in the Museo Bilotti—an interest that he shared with several other postmodernists in the early 1980s.

Shortly after his death, de Chirico gained a second life as the appropriation poetics that he had pioneered became the defining feature of postmodernist art. Until then de Chirico's work since the 1920s had been poorly received. Tillers and other postmodernist artists admired de Chirico's late work for the very qualities that modernist critics found most wanting: its stylistic non sequiturs, appropriations and repetitions.

Tillers has appropriated the work of many artists, but de Chirico is his most favoured source. No other artist has shown such devotion to de Chirico's art and at the same time taken its influence into a new realm. Its metaphysical and enigmatic qualities resonate in Tillers' work. These are the same qualities that drew Tillers to Western Desert painting. He discovered both at much the same time, in the early 1980s, when he embarked on his canvasboard format—which since then has been

his signature style. This was also the moment and the context in which Western Desert painting began to play a decisive role in the Australian artworld and its debates about the direction and meaning of contemporary art.

Before 1980 Aboriginal art was the preserve of ethnographic discourse. It first began to be seen in the context of contemporary art in the early 1980s because of the impact of large Western Desert acrylic paintings on canvas within the context of postmodernism. Young artists and curators at the forefront of this debate first drew the artworld's attention to Western Desert painting. Tillers played a central role in this shift. Two articles that he wrote in the contemporary art journal *Art & Text* in the early 1980s were instrumental in igniting debate about the significance of Western Desert painting for contemporary art.¹³ Of greater impact was his art. Aboriginal art was, along with de Chirico's, among the first images that Tillers appropriated in what became his signature canvasboard format. Both have remained important sources of his art to this day.

While de Chirico re-orientated the dominant empirical and positivist mood of the nineteenth century to metaphysical questions, he also broke decisively with the idealist metaphysics of traditional Western art and philosophy by locating the nature of being in lived experience and everyday life, rather than in an ideal pure state. In this spirit he pioneered an interest in the unconscious and language, and their enigmatic structures of repetition, multiplicity, hybridity and ambiguity as sites of being—themes that continue to resonate in contemporary art and philosophy. If this makes his post-1920 art 'postmetaphysical', as Keala Jewell suggests, it also presaged the poststructuralist concerns of postmodernism. This, at least, is how Tillers judges the relationship between his own postmodernism¹⁴ and the art of de Chirico.

De Chirico's approach to metaphysics shows many similarities with Aboriginal metaphysics, which is also embedded in everyday life, in particular places, and also in structures of repetition and ambiguity that reverberate in language and the unconscious. This is one reason why Dreaming is such an important concept in Aboriginal art. The term 'Dreamtime' or 'Dreaming' is the agreed translation of the many Aboriginal words (there are many Aboriginal languages in Australia) that signify this metaphysical realm. Spencer and Gillen first translated it from the Arrernte word, 'Altjira', over 100 years ago. At the same time the German missionary Carl Strehlow, working with Arrernte elders, translated the Western concept of God as 'Altjira'. Whether it is translated as Dreaming or God, Aboriginal cosmology is orientated to a metaphysical outlook embedded

in, rather than opposed to, everyday life. It places great importance on dreams, as it is through dreams that the ancestors speak to mankind and pass on sacred knowledge. This direct contemporaneous conduit to the ancestors lends Dreaming a temporality in which the past is ever present—unlike the Western modernist conception of the new, in which the present supersedes the past. This sense of an ever-present temporality—Nietzsche's 'eternal return'—also pervades de Chirico's work.

This shared sense of time and place is why the role of particular sites and ancestral figures are so important to both de Chirico and Western Desert artists. For de Chirico these sites and ancestors relate to his Mediterranean origins, just as for Western Desert artists they relate to their place and histories. In this respect the histories they allude to are (as Jewell suggests) topographies, an idea that also informs Tillers work.

For Western Desert artists these sites of being resonate with the energy of the particular Ancestral Beings that rested there. Likewise, from de Chirico's piazzas emanate a specific ancestral power, which in this case relates directly to the classical past of Mediterranean civilizations. Aboriginal depictions of waterholes and other sacred sites share with de Chirico's depictions of piazzas a belief in the continuing presence of this ancestral energy: thus their enigmatic quality. Both depict concentrations of ancestral power.

Not only are Ancestral narratives often communicated in dreams but Aboriginal Dreaming also has the fluid ambiguous space and time of actual dreams. It is, in a sense, the unconscious of the world, and this unconscious is structured like a language that can be read. Indeed, the iconography of Western Desert painting derives directly from Ancestral Beings that were the first artists. Their designs are found on the rock walls and turingas (sacred stones), and when copied evoke the power of Dreaming. As such their contemporary designs are often appropriations of ancestral designs, movements and rhythms that bring to life the original, drawing on its powers for contemporary effects. Hence Aboriginal metaphysics opposes traditional Socratic metaphysics in which the copy is always something less than the original. In Aboriginal metaphysics and that of de Chirico and Tillers, the power of the original is enhanced every time it is copied or appropriated. Like language, Dreaming comes into being through repetition or reiteration, and in a similar manner to that evoked in *Hebdomeros*.

De Chirico worked at a time when European intellectuals such as Nietzsche and Freud, as well as various symbolist artists, were developing alternative world-

views that drew on ideas of the unconscious and spaces redolent with past events that eternally return. As I have suggested, direct parallels can be drawn between such thinking and Aboriginal Dreaming, and specifically between de Chirico's treatment of place and the depictions of Dreaming sites in Western Desert painting. Even more interesting are the parallels between the evocations of Aboriginal Ancestral Beings and the classical references in de Chirico's paintings—his ancestral figures are often artists such as Titian, Veronese and Rubens—and their uses of appropriation and recurring motifs as a poetic strategy to invoke the eternal return of ancestral narratives. De Chirico does not just appropriate particular images; rather he evokes in them an ancestral power and, at the same time, an unexpected contemporaneity with the present. Further, he combines aspects of different stories and images into new narratives for contemporary times. This creates a particular type of space and temporality that has since become associated with not just postmodernism but also contemporary art more generally.

In 1981 the North American critic Benjamin Buchloh argued that the then current return to figuration and appropriation art was a repetition of what had occurred in the years immediately after World War One with artists such as de Chirico.¹⁵ For him this moment after the War was a lost opportunity from which Western art never recovered.

Buchloh could not be expected to see, in 1981, where postmodernism would go. However, he also was unable to understand the implications of the postmodern turn because he did not appreciate the radical consequences of de Chirico's art. Thus Buchloh was deeply critical of what he considered to be the inherent conservatism of this postmodern turn, as if it was a new return to order. The artworld's interest in Western Desert painting at this time was also judged by some critics to be a conservative return to both modernist and colonialist values.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that these moves in the early 1980s were the beginning of a deep shift in contemporary art towards the more open-ended post-Western poetics that now prevails. Today the old division between 'the West' and 'the Rest' that characterized the production and reception of art in de Chirico's day has broken down.¹⁶ Artists and traditions from around the world now exhibit together in the spirit of what is called 'the contemporary'.¹⁷ This cosmopolitan spirit puts seemingly incommensurable practices and beliefs in conversation. In the 1970s Western Desert artists began making art for the Western market in the belief that such conversations are possible.

De Chirico's art offers a particularly rich context for

an exchange between what are perhaps the two most distant and incommensurable human traditions on the planet, the European and the Aboriginal. If this seems an altogether utopian and foolish claim, Tiller's paintings, which put into conversation all manner of different voices, including those of de Chirico and Western Desert artists, provide a model for this cosmopolitan exchange. Hung in the room adjacent to the de Chirico gallery, they are a contextual bridge between the paintings of de Chirico and the Western Desert artists that occupy the other galleries in the museum. So too are the works of many urban-based Aboriginal artists, who in various ways translate Dreaming into a contemporary idiom. In successful translations, said Benjamin: 'the life of the originals' is 'ever-renewed' and attains its 'latest and most abundant flowering.'¹⁸ This is what defines a living tradition: the makeover and in some senses transfiguration of past practices and beliefs into contemporary ones.

Ian McClean