

IMANTS TILLERS

one world many visions

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 14 July – 16 October 2006

This education material, produced to accompany the exhibition *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, introduces teachers and secondary students to the work of this significant Australian artist. This major exhibition traces the development of contemporary artist Imants Tillers from 1984 to 2006. The title of the exhibition, *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, suggests the multiple nature of the references in Tillers' art that in turn reflect the diversity of the world in which we live.

Individual cards introduce and discuss an image, and present discussion points and activities. The diverse subject matter explored within the exhibition links to key learning areas, such as Art, English, History, Mathematics, Science and Philosophy.

This kit has been designed to be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia. Additional material is available on the Gallery's website: nga.gov.au/Tillers.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Deborah Hart (ed.), *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006.

Origins, originality + beyond, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1986.

An Australian accent: three artists – Mike Parr, Imants Tillers, Ken Unsworth, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: John Kaldor, 1984.

Wystan Curnow, *Imants Tillers and the 'Book of power'*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998.

GALLERY INFORMATION

National Gallery of Australia
Parkes Place Canberra ACT
nga.gov.au

OPENING HOURS

Open daily 10 am – 5 pm (except Christmas Day)

ADMISSION

Entry to the permanent collection is free
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GALLERY CAFE

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This education material is largely based on the catalogue *Imants Tillers: one world many visions* and has been produced by Adriane Boag, Educator, Youth and Community Programs, in collaboration with Deborah Hart, Senior Curator of Australian Painting and Sculpture, and curator of *Imants Tillers: one world many visions*, with assistance from Tess Horwitz and Camilla Shanahan.

■ national gallery of **australia**

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INTRODUCTION

Imants Tillers is a contemporary Australian artist whose work reflects many of the developments in art history, both in Australia and internationally, since the 1970s. From the earliest image in this exhibition, *A life of blank* 1984, through to the recent *Terra incognita* 2005, Tillers' work can be seen to engage with postmodern debates about art making.

Born in Australia in 1950, Tillers is the son of Latvian émigrés who had met in a displaced persons' camp in Germany before migrating to Australia in 1949. Tillers' upbringing reflects the northern European cultural background of his parents, and has provided a context and personal dimension to his questioning of origin, identity and cross-cultural influences. Tillers' knowledge of Latvia comes from his parents' memories, from his attendance at weekend Latvian classes when he was growing up, from visits to Latvia, and from books. Second-hand experience of diverse cultural influences, along with the distance of Australia from Europe, prompted Tillers to consider the transmission of information via mechanical reproduction in his earliest works from the 1970s.

Tillers was a young architecture student when artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude began their project *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, Australia* in 1969. To complete the project – in which part of the coastline south of Sydney was wrapped in 100 000 square meters of material and 60 km of rope – Christo required the assistance of art students, one of whom was Tillers. Participating in this event was a formative experience for Tillers, not just because of the total transformation of the landscape, but also because of the opportunity to work with an internationally renowned artist.

In 1981 Tillers began his distinct method of painting where small canvasboards are displayed together to create large and often complex paintings. Working on small, individual units has allowed Tillers to produce large paintings in relatively small studios. From the start the artist has numbered each canvasboard, and in 2006 the sequence has reached almost 80 000. This system is known variously as the Book of Power, the Large Image Field, the Canvasboard System and One Painting. These titles suggest a work in progress, one that is diverse and open to change within its structural limits, perhaps even a self-perpetuating system directed by the artist.

Beginning in the late 1960s conceptual and performance art provided artists with alternative ways to make art. Many conceptual artists use numbers to mark time and Tillers' canvasboards share this conceptual structure. Tillers' painted canvasboards are stored and often exhibited as stacks, almost as containers of history. The process of installing his works on the wall with Velcro dots invokes repetition and reminds the viewer how these paintings are made. In 1986 Tillers wrote:

I work at a desk, not in a studio. Yet one of the reasons I use this method is to make huge paintings that have substantial presence. But when I take the picture down from the wall it reverts to a stack of panels. The image disappears. This is important because it puts the images I've done to rest. I get obsessed with the intense feelings I'm dealing with so I like to be able to change my focus quickly. It's a kind of detachment for reasons of self-survival. Also when I quietly contemplate these stacks of paintings in the corner of my room as a simple mass, volume and substance, I have that same comforting sense of reassurance that a scholar feels on entering a well-stocked library. (Imants Tillers, 'Statement by the artist', in *Origins, originality + beyond*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1986.)

The Book of Power can also be compared to a postmodern text, in that the meaning and connections between images in Tillers' work are not fixed – they can be non-linear, subjective and contradictory. In the 1980s postmodern debates questioned the status of the original and appropriation. When an artwork is seen only as a copy, the physical presence of it as an 'original' is lost. This presence is sometimes referred to as the aura of an artwork, thus giving the original status as 'the real thing'. Part of Tillers' canvasboard project is to reinvest the copy or reproduction he finds in books or magazines with the status and aura of an original. He does this by transforming the found image onto canvasboards, altering and adjusting scale, texture and colour, and by placing this painting into a new context. Indeed, the divisions between each of the smaller canvasboards in Tillers' work can be seen to refer directly to the grid lines used to scale up and copy an image.

This appropriation of images by other artists is one of the chief concerns of postmodernism. While questioning ideas about the originality of the copied artwork, appropriation is also concerned with interpretation. An image reproduced in a book, magazine or painting is very different from the original. Changes in colour, texture, scale and context can occur through the printing process, which is often referred to as mechanical reproduction.

When Tillers exhibits his works old meanings can be rediscovered and new ones found. Over time Tillers' choices and combinations build their own web of connections as his paintings become recognisable as the work of Imants Tillers. The powerful relationships exposed in the flow of information from one place to another, and the role of the media are central to postmodern theories of art. Tillers challenges the idea of fixed meanings and relationships through his appropriation of images from different artists from many cultures to create an open and inclusive dialogue for art making.

A LIFE OF BLANK VI 1984

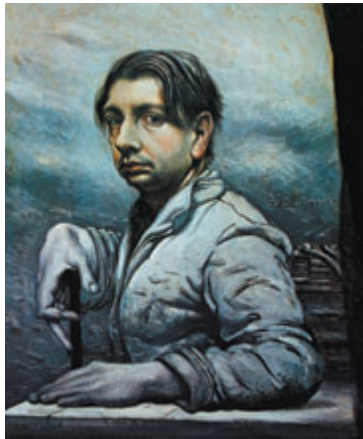


Imants Tillers *A life of blank VI* 1984
pencil and charcoal on 6 canvasboards
Private collection, Canberra

A LIFE OF BLANK VI 1984

A life of blank VI signals Imants Tillers' fascination for artist Giorgio de Chirico. Based on a self-portrait by de Chirico, Tillers' work raises questions of identity and a sense of his own presence and absence simultaneously. In comparing *A life of blank VI* with de Chirico's original a number of transformations can be noted. In his self-portrait de Chirico used paint and brushes to create a physical likeness; however, Tillers uses charcoal and pencil, and the image is covered in fingerprints. These physical signs reveal Tillers' own presence and the shifts in scale, texture and context imbue the appropriated image with a new aura.

Giorgio de Chirico
Self-portrait
1924 tempera
on canvas
Collection
of Giovanni
Deana, Venice
© Giorgio
de Chirico,
Licensed by
SIAE, Rome
and VISCOPY,
Australia, 2006



- *A life of blank VI* creates a sense of déjà vu because we recognise the image and associate it with de Chirico. Tillers writes of the melancholy of the reproduction and how it is always so much less than the original, however, distance and melancholy are overcome in the remaking of this work. *A life of blank VI* is deliberately enigmatic and mysterious: the identity of the figure cannot be absolutely confirmed.

- De Chirico painted over one hundred self-portraits, reflecting the mutability of the self, sometimes expressed in the form of a statue and sometimes as another person altogether. Tillers transports just one of these portraits across time and place. De Chirico provides Tillers with a model of an artist whose work doesn't progress in a linear fashion – the natural succession of the new over the old. Instead he regarded his career as a lifelong project encompassing chance, change and contradiction.

- Tillers takes up the idea of the perceived centres, such as Europe, at a distance from Australia and seeks to bridge the gap. He is fascinated by misunderstandings or misinterpretations that are possible when looking at art through reproductions. When Tillers re-made de Chirico's self-portrait in *A life of blank VI* he was looking at a black-and-white reproduction, initially unaware that the original de Chirico painting depicted the head of a real person emerging from the body of a marble statue.

DISCUSSION

- Consider the ways in which identity can be established. Why has Tillers smudged his fingerprints over his reinterpretation of de Chirico's self-portrait?
- Research the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Marcel Duchamp. How do these artists question accepted ideas about self-portraits and identity?

ACTIVITY

- Look at the work of an artist known for their self-portraits, for example, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, or Frida Kahlo. Why have these artists produced many self-portraits throughout their lifetime? Choose one self-portrait and consider how it could be transformed to express your interests. Reinterpret the portrait in an expressive way using a different medium to invest the image with evidence of yourself.

INHERITED ABSOLUTE 1992



Imants Tillers *Inherited absolute* 1992
oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer
paint on 115 canvasboards Orange
Regional Gallery Gift of the Friends of the
Orange Regional Gallery

INHERITED ABSOLUTE 1992

Inherited absolute combines references to *The painter's family* 1926 by Giorgio de Chirico, overlaid by a faint web of lines, and a drawing on the left, by Tillers' daughter Isidore when she was four years old.

The mannequin-like figures, borrowed from de Chirico, seem to inhabit a limbo world between being and non-being, suggesting the ambiguity of experience and a move beyond the world of appearances. As de Chirico wrote:

To be really immortal, a work must go completely beyond the limits of the human: good sense and logic will be missing from it ... In this way it will come close to the dream state, and also to the mentality of children. (Margaret Crosland, 'Introduction to Giorgio de Chirico', in Giorgio de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, London: Peter Owen Ltd, 1992, p. 6.)

- This painting, from 1992, expresses a personal response by Tillers to his life at the time, with two young children. The family unit is an enduring set of relationships – a universal and levelling experience that is nevertheless particular and unique for each individual.
- The title *Inherited absolute* suggests the physical links between generations. As well as inherited givens, family is formed through circumstances and experience. The family in this work is placed in a studio with the addition of an easel and painting stick, suggesting the presence of Tillers' art practice in the family.
- On the left-hand panel a child's early words and the repetition of numbers link to the idea of learning and what this means for the child.
- In *Inherited absolute* it is the physical placement of the elements within the composition that communicates the idea of the family unit. The three figures are readily identifiable as a family, familiar to us from traditional images of the Holy Family. The text on the left-hand panel represents another system of unification: the child grows up within the family to become a functional member of society. At the same time he or she gains mastery in parallel systems, such as language, that validate our sense of identity.

DISCUSSION

- Re-read the de Chirico quote and consider it within the context of Tillers' *Inherited absolute*.
- How has the concept of the family unit changed over time?
- Each individual within a family experiences the family unit differently. Suggest how this might be the case.
- Consider the various ways in which we communicate, apart from language. What are they and how could they influence the message being conveyed?

ACTIVITIES

- Find images of families from different periods in art history and contrast them with contemporary discussions in newspapers and by politicians on the role and importance of the family unit.
- Choose an image of a family and a text that discusses some aspect of family life. Combine them to make an image of unity and/or contradiction. Pay attention to surface, scale and composition.
- Look at artists who combine images and texts, and investigate the relationships between the two. Some examples of artists who use text are George Baldessari and Barbara Kruger.

MOUNT ANALOGUE 1985



Imants Tillers *Mount Analogue* 1985 oil, oilstick, synthetic polymer paint on 165 canvasboards National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1987

MOUNT ANALOGUE 1985

Imants Tillers was drawn to Austrian-born artist Eugene von Guérard's image *North-east view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko* 1863, partly because of the art-historical associations of mountains with the mystical and the sublime. Mountains can be considered as the meeting place between heaven and earth, where humans feel they can come closer to the spiritual. Von Guérard's landscape, however, records a real place and an historical event.

Von Guérard's painting is based on sketches he made as part of a scientific expedition to record variations in the earth's magnetic fields in 1862. He remains faithful in part to the empirical or scientific nature of this expedition, with his precise rendition of the snowcapped mountains and the approaching storm. In *North-east view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko* the record of the site is framed by a dramatic rock formation in the foreground and also includes a wind-blown, caped figure gesturing towards the expansive landscape. Through the combination of an accurate portrayal of the landscape and an interest in the romantic associations of the scene, von Guérard describes both the physical and the metaphysical aspects of the journey.

Eugene von Guérard *North-east view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko* 1863
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1973



Tillers' *Mount Analogue* 1985 is a textured, gestural painting where the divisions between multiple canvasboards convey the mismatches that often occur in reproductions. This contrasts with von Guérard's meticulous nineteenth-century depiction.

Tillers' title, *Mount Analogue*, is taken from the title of a novel by French author René Daumal. This novel provided Tillers with a philosophical parallel for his interest in the gathering and recording of knowledge as a spiritual journey of the self.

- In Daumal's novel *Mount Analogue*, the main character sets out on a journey of discovery, in search of a destination that can be seen as a metaphor for self-knowledge. This journey reveals knowledge to be infinite and various. Although the novel was unfinished, the main character realises that knowledge can enhance awe and reverence for the mystery of living but cannot explain it.
- *Mount Analogue* was one of the paintings selected for exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1986. It reflected von Guérard's image to a European audience that was familiar with the nineteenth-century German Romantic tradition in which the original was painted. In this reflection of the past and in the transformation of the original in a contemporary way, *Mount Analogue* incorporates both surprise and irony.

DISCUSSION

- Discuss an experience you have had where the process has become more important than the destination.
- *Mount Analogue* depicts an Australian landscape. How does it challenge assumptions about our continent and its landscape?

HEART OF THE WOOD 1985



Imants Tillers *Heart of the wood* 1985 oilstick, charcoal oil and synthetic polymer paint on 338 canvasboards Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney JW Power Bequest Purchased 1985

HEART OF THE WOOD 1985

The interior in Imants Tillers' *Heart of the wood* is a dramatic, one-point perspective image of a room where surfaces are textured to appear as wood grain. From the heavy beams supporting the ceiling to the walls and floorboards, the eye is drawn towards the small, dark doorway in the centre of the painting, as if some mysterious continuation of the past is there, waiting in the gloom. Many names appear inscribed in the floorboards of the painting, while across one of the ceiling beams is the name Imants Tillers. Other images incorporated into the work are a Margaret Preston native Australian flower painting and a human figure being consumed by flames, which is based on an image by Georg Baselitz.

Heart of the wood appropriates a work by German artist Anselm Kiefer, titled *Germany's spiritual heroes* 1973. Born in 1945, Kiefer's work was informed by the Second World War, an apocalyptic event in German history. By confronting the negative and positive legacies of his cultural inheritance Kiefer suggests the complex nature of history.

Tillers' *Heart of the wood* shows a large stage-like interior, reproduced from Kiefer's painting based on his studio, a converted schoolroom. Like Kiefer, Tillers uses the studio/schoolroom as the place where the lessons of history are absorbed, learnt and transformed as a way to create a viable future.

- In Kiefer's painting *Germany's spiritual heroes*, the names of Germany's cultural icons, such as Richard Wagner and Joseph Beuys, are written on the floorboards of the wooden room, which is being threatened by fire from the edges of the painting. In *Heart of the wood* Tillers adds his own name to the rafters and surrounds them with Latvian storybook characters, inspired by the books he read as a child. By doing this Tillers puts himself, an Australian

artist, on the level of Kiefer's great artists, aware of the irony of this and of how it will be viewed by an audience aware of Kiefer's work. Tillers is also challenging the idea of who is allowed into the pantheon of art. This is especially relevant for an artist on the so-called margins, like Australia.

- *Heart of the wood* contains personal as well as cultural significance. In this painting Tillers suggests that regional artists are able to challenge their peripheral status in a meaningful way. The thematic layers in Tillers' painting include the experience of being the son of Latvian immigrants in Australia, the contradictions of living in a country with a recent European culture (while also being isolated from that culture), and the creation of works that are meaningful both locally and beyond geographical borders.
- An iconic Australian image is present in Tillers' appropriation of a Margaret Preston painting titled *Western Australian gum blossom* 1928. In this reference Tillers pays tribute to Preston's pioneering modernism between the wars and to his wife, Jennifer Slatyer, who ran a business called Modern Wildflowers at the time.
- Above the Preston image is part of a Georg Baselitz painting from his *New man* series, which portrays a man struggling to free himself from the stump of a tree. Tillers paints this figure on fire, trapped and vulnerable – like history – to destruction and regeneration.



Imants Tillers
Heart of the wood
1985 (detail)

Anselm Kiefer
Germany's spiritual heroes
1973 oil and charcoal on burlap mounted on canvas
The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica
photograph: Douglas M Parker Studio, Los Angeles



DISCUSSION

Find the cross-section of the tree trunk in *Heart of the wood*. What associations do you make with the tree rings and how does this affect your reading of the painting?

ACTIVITY

- Create your own room and place within it an event or period from history. It could be a collage, drawing or installation.

TERRA INCOGNITA 2005



Imants Tillers *Terra incognita* 2005 synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 288 canvasboards Collection of the artist

TERRA INCOGNITA 2005

Terra incognita is an expansive painting with place names and language groups of Indigenous people before European settlement stencilled across the surface. The rolling text over the golden background evokes the sense of a past that is often forgotten or overlooked.

- Across the centre of *Terra incognita* is a black line interspersed with a linear pattern and the words 'wave after wave'. There is a repetitious flow of movement, suggesting the migration of peoples, cultural change, loss and multiple histories that become the fabric of the past.
- In the upper left corner a skeletal grim reaper drives all before him, galloping on the crest of the waves until he meets, in the bottom right corner, the statement of endurance: 'we have decided not to die'. This could refer to Indigenous or European people, history or memory.
- Fading and reasserting itself across the entire expanse of *Terra incognita* is a reference to *Big yam dreaming* 1995, by Emily Kam Ngwarray, an Aboriginal artist who established an astonishing body of paintings in an eight-year period when she was already in her seventies. The linear rhythms of this painting act as a unifying background onto which the Indigenous place names from David Horton's map of Aboriginal Australia are placed. Each name in the artwork approximates its geographical position on the continent. These names indicate the density and diversity of Aboriginal pre-colonial population and history that contradicts the notions of *terra nullius*, the so-called empty land. The gestural marks inspired by Ngwarray's work convey the significance of ancestral power in the landscape.



Emily Kam
Ngwarray *Big
yam dreaming*
1995 synthetic
polymer paint on
canvas National
Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Presented through
the Art Foundation
of Victoria by
Janet and Donald
Holt and family,
Governors, 1995
© Emily Kam
Ngwarray Licensed
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Australia, 2006

- To pay tribute to Indigenous culture Tillers responds to the creative power of Ngwarray's painting, to the act of creation explicit in *Big yam dreaming*, and also to Horton's map of Australia. He recalls the losses of the past and the resilience of people in the present. As he wrote:

Thus both *Terra incognita* (shown here for the first time in this exhibition) and *Terra negata* (selected for the Sydney Biennale in 2006) are for me a kind of homage to indigenous Australia, a lament for the tragedies of all the lost tribes, languages and cultures of Australia but also, simultaneously, a kind of honour roll for the spectacular resurgence of their culture. This has been revealed to the wider world through art and especially through the medium of painting – an amazing phenomenon to which all Australians have borne witness over the last 30 years. (Imants Tillers, 'Terra incognita', *artonview*, autumn, 2006, p. 15.)

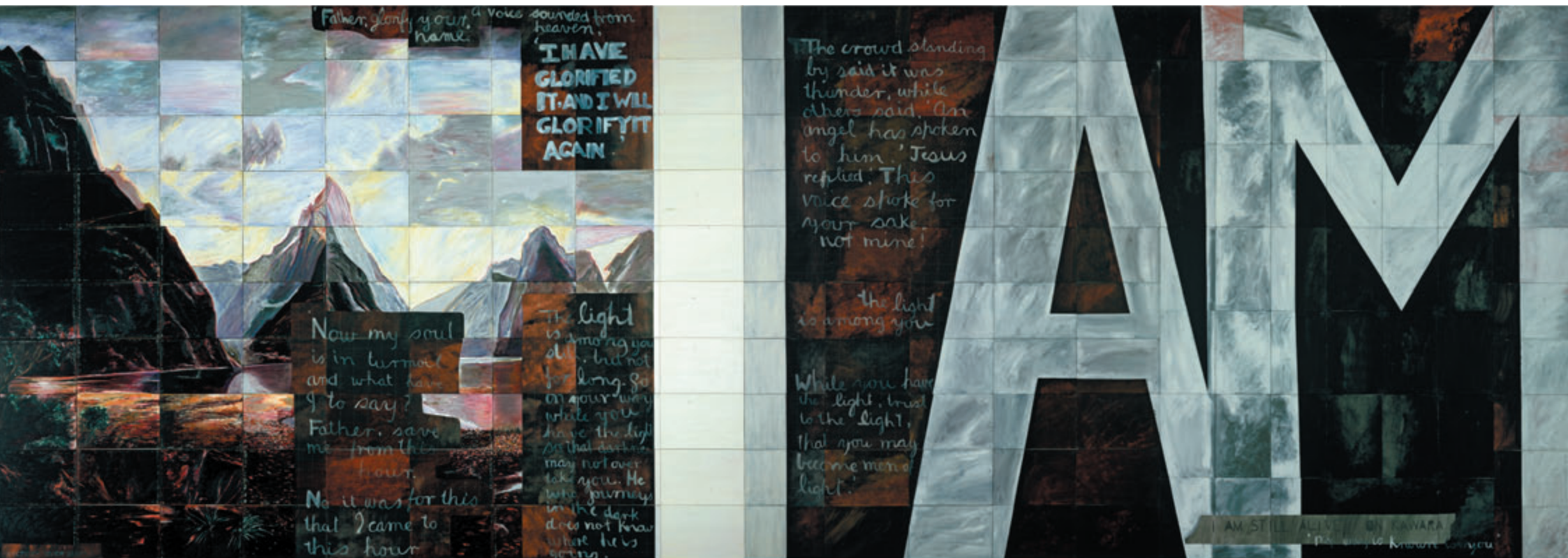
DISCUSSION

- In the 1980s there were debates about the appropriation of Aboriginal art by non-Indigenous people because some of the works included sacred imagery, and it was not seen as appropriate for a non-Indigenous person to be engaging with this material. On the other hand Aboriginal art, like all art, is varied and uses a range of sources and media. Tillers is interested in Aboriginal art being among the most important work produced in the late twentieth century. In keeping with his interest in recognising different forms of expression from around the world, it would perhaps be more surprising if Tillers had not engaged with Indigenous art in this country. Discuss.
- Do you think modern Australians understand the pre-colonial history of Australia? If not, how could we improve this situation?

ACTIVITIES

- Draw a freehand map of Australia and, from memory, inscribe as many place names as you can on it.
- Construct an image map of the world. Find visual art images that could represent particular regions, countries or people. Think about how this kind of map represents place.

HIATUS 1987



Imants Tillers *Hiatus* 1987 oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 190 canvasboards Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki Purchased 1988

HIATUS 1987

Hiatus is a dramatic synthesis of text and landscape. Although the text dominates the composition, the shapes outlined by the enormous letters 'am' echo the lofty mountain-scape on the left. The contrasts of light and dark, combined with the commanding language and scale of the work, suggest the power of a spiritual revelation.

When read in conjunction with the title *Hiatus*, the letter 'I' at the centre of the composition seems to divide the two parts of the work, acting in a sense as a hiatus, a break or gap. The painting is partly a cohesive surface of colour harmonies and repeated form, but conveys a divide in the different approaches to identity – to place and the self. The division between a nineteenth-century view of the sublime landscape and a twentieth-century use of text relating to human existence and a spiritual dimension poses questions rather presenting fixed certainties.

- The image on the left of the work was inspired by Eugene von Guérard's nineteenth-century painting of a New Zealand landscape, *Milford Sound with Pembroke Peak and Bower Falls on the West Coast of the middle island, New Zealand 1877–79*.

Eugene von Guérard *Milford Sound with Pembroke Peak and Bower Falls on the west coast of Middle Island, New Zealand 1877–79* oil on canvas Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney Purchased 1970



- The image on the right of the work is an appropriation of Colin McCahon's *Victory over death 2 1970*. The words 'I am' are taken from a conversation between God and Moses in Exodus, chapter 3 verse 13, in the Old Testament: 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM". And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, I AM has sent me to you'. When used by McCahon and Tillers, the words 'I am' are transformed through the composition to



Colin McCahon *Victory over death 2 1970* synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Gift of the New Zealand Government © Colin McCahon Research and Publications Trust

state both presence and absence. McCahon's starkly dramatic painting both asserts and questions biblical texts. Through the use of black, white and tonalities of grey the work evokes the struggle between light and dark, doubt and faith, the certainty and uncertainty of who we are. The dominant warm brown tones of Tillers' painting imbue *Hiatus* with a strong sense of the earth and connection with the environment.

DISCUSSION

- What is Tillers saying about the way language and culture form our concepts of spirituality and the land?
- Why has Tillers appropriated a number of Eugene von Guérard's Romantic and sublime paintings of landscapes, for example, in *Hiatus* and *Mount Analogue*?
- How do you think von Guérard's nineteenth-century European art training would have influenced his visions of Australia and New Zealand?

ACTIVITY

- Combine an artist's image of contemporary urban Australia – for example, by Howard Arkley or Jenny Watson – with text from a newspaper, magazine or song lyric. Allow the letters in the text to connect with the image in a dynamic way.
- Think about a place you have visited and the way this place made you feel. Write down your thoughts and select an idea, a phrase or a couple of words that encapsulate this feeling. Combine a drawing of the place you imagined and the text you have written. Look at how these two approaches can convey similar ideas in quite different ways.



Imants Tillers *Farewell to Reason* 1996 oilstick, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on 292 canvasboards National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1986

DIASPORA SERIES



Compilation of images from the *Diaspora series* 1992–96

DIASPORA SERIES

This series of four paintings, each made up of more than 200 canvasboards, comprises *Diaspora* 1992, *Izkliede* 1994 (Latvian for diaspora), *Paradiso* 1994 (an anagram of the word diaspora), and *Farewell to reason* 1996. All four major paintings relate to the dispersal of people from their common national origin and can be viewed as either 6 x 48 or 24 x 12 panel works. These paintings are like chapters in the Book of Power, each one mimicking its overall structure in microcosm.

Parallel to the theme of the diaspora of peoples is the dispersal of images through mass production, and Tillers' practice of appropriation seems destined to explore this particular aspect of world events. Tillers wrote that *Diaspora* 1992 – the first work made for an exhibition in Riga, Latvia, in 1993 – came out of the 'present cataclysmic historic moment'. He watched the liberation of the Baltic States from Soviet rule in 1990 with joy, and welcomed the opportunity for a solo exhibition of his work at the National Museum of Art in Riga in 1993 after liberation.

The experiences of Tillers' parents as displaced persons and the dispersal of the people of Latvia after the Second World War are drawn upon by Tillers and unite as a concrete event in this series. The four paintings reference communities that develop from dislocation, such as Australia and New Zealand, countries that continue to debate their emerging sense of identity and what we now call multiculturalism.

The images in the *Diaspora* series appear as worlds within worlds, connected by contrasts of light and dark, suggestive of different times and places, and of loss and hope. Yet there is no single narrative in these works. The paintings contain many voices, often of the insider versus the outsider, diversity versus dominant cultural norms. Combined in *Diaspora* 1992 are images, words and symbols from more than twenty works of art by eleven artists from different art-historical periods and cultures. Key references that Tillers makes in this series are to Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz and Colin McCahon.

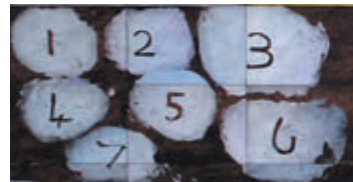
FAREWELL TO REASON 1996

No end
To the rolling plain:
The white sky
No end to the long black line
Of thundering mountains
And,
Like the land-
The soil and ice
And the barbed gorse-
No end
To the sound of the sea on the shore
Thundering in the heart like the heart's core
John Caselberg 'The sound of the morning'

Farewell to reason, the final work in the *Diaspora* series, relates to the displacement of people over time, including indigenous people from their original homelands. This painting sets a somber tone. Words and phrases, such as 'destiny' and 'you are forgiven', and images of crosses, curled up figures, streams of numbers and the ghostly yet dignified presence of the central Aboriginal figure seem to measure a human history of adversity and the hope of salvation. The play between light and dark across the surface of the painting echoes the pendulum swing between loss and despair, hope and redemption. The ebb and flow of experience can be seen in the structure of the painting, which shows signs of mortality and renewal, including regeneration through nature.

As with all of Tillers' works, *Farewell to reason* can be enjoyed intuitively; however, the multi-layered texts and use of symbols from western and Indigenous cultures encourage the viewer to enter a journey of discovery.

- In the lower left of *Farewell to reason* is Tillers' interpretation of Colin McCahon's painting *Rocks in the sky* 1976. The numbers in the clouds, appropriated from McCahon, seem to suggest the passage of time, or of moving between states of being. The numbers across the surface of *Farewell to reason* add to the feeling that we are looking at fragments of a code or map that we can decipher.



- The poem on the left-hand side is written by New Zealand poet John Caselberg, and is called 'The sound of morning'. Caselberg was a close friend of McCahon's, and both of these artists link the landscape and the power of its immortality to human frailty and mortality.

- The viewer is drawn to the figure of the Aboriginal man at the centre of the composition. Stretching from the top to the bottom of the painting this figure locates the subject of this work in Australia, and evokes the sadness and loss of an ancient culture as a result of colonisation. Geographical dislocation may be more easily represented than spiritual dislocation, yet this alienated spirit is perhaps what imbues *Farewell to reason* with such overwhelming melancholy. Tillers found the image of the Aboriginal man in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the cover of a book about the tragedy of Maralinga was reproduced. Maralinga was the Australian site for nuclear testing by the British in the 1950s. While carrying out the tests, the British disregarded the traditional presence of Aboriginal communities on that site.



- The spiral image on the chest of the Aboriginal man makes a connection to the land, extending out across the painting. This spiral could also be imagined as a ripple, linking images through subject matter and composition. For example, the image on the left – a drawing of a huddled and seemingly bound figure – is based on an artwork by Australian artist Eric Thake. On the right-hand side of the central Aboriginal figure is Tillers' interpretation of a drawing of an embalmed figure by Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn.



DISCUSSION

- Consider the compositional devices and colour used in *Farewell to reason*. What was your initial response to this painting and how did your response change as you found out more about the individual elements in the artwork?
- *Farewell to reason* evokes a mood of sadness but also offers other possibilities. How does the chalice of communion featured in the work and the nearby words 'you are forgiven' help to alleviate the sadness of the image?

ACTIVITIES

- Find a number of related images and pieces of text. Using pencil and charcoal transpose elements from each onto one piece of paper, manipulating scale to radically alter their original size. What new meanings emerge?
- Choose another work from the *Diaspora* series and write fifty words about it, making connections between individual elements. Compare these interpretations within the class and identify the appropriations.

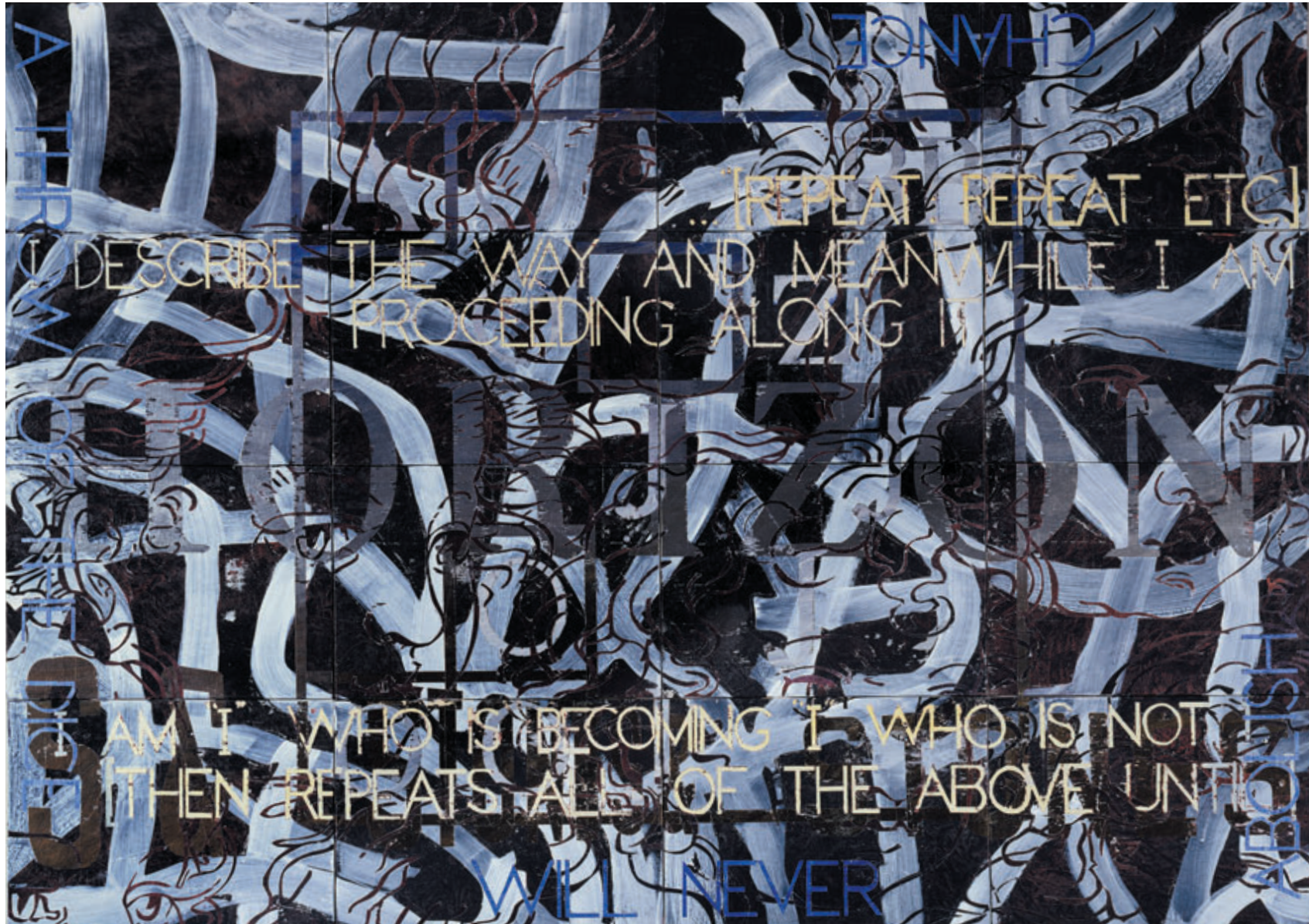


Imants Tillers *Nature speaks (Kosciuszko)*
 1999 synthetic polymer paint and gouache on
 16 canvasboards Collection of Peter Laurence
 Thomas, Melbourne



Imants Tillers *Nature speaks: BP 2004*
 synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 16
 canvasboards On loan from Frederico Cezar
 de Araujo, Brazilian Ambassador, Canberra

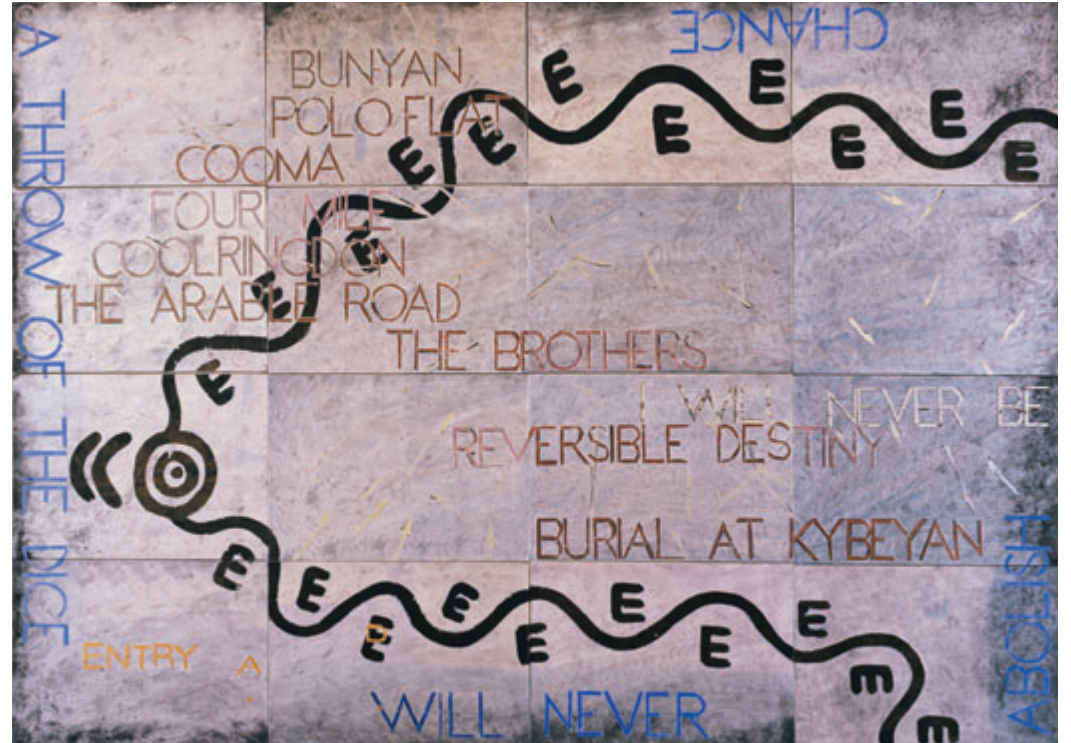
NATURE SPEAKS 1998–2006



Imants Tillers *Nature speaks: VI* 1999 synthetic polymer paint and gouache on 16 canvasboards Collection of Professor Roger Benjamin and Ms Kate Sands, Sydney



Michael Jagamara Nelson at work on
Nature speaks: AD 2002
 photograph: Simon Wright



Imants Tillers and Michael Jagamara Nelson
Nature speaks: AD 2002 synthetic polymer
 paint and gouache on 16 canvasboards
 The Paul Eliadis Collection, Brisbane

NATURE SPEAKS 1998–2006

From the late 1990s until 2006 Imants Tillers has continued to work on his *Nature speaks* series. Living on the plains of the Monaro with the Snowy Mountains nearby has provided Tillers with a new physical relationship to and awareness of the landscape.

Tillers' initial aim for the series was to complete one hundred works, each made up of sixteen panels. He has now exceeded this number. As a group, the *Nature speaks* series forms a system within the greater canvasboard project. The title *Nature speaks* suggests that nature has its own voice or language. This language contains rhythms and repetitions that we can intuitively respond to. These are the natural rhythms of the seasons, of decay and regeneration. The larger cycles of nature are also reflected in each tiny organism or fragment of nature and in each individual.

In his article 'When locality prevails' Tillers writes of the influence moving to Cooma had on his work:

Naturally, issues of locality and identity have become uppermost in my mind and have made their presence felt in my recent work, not as literal representations of landscape, of the grass, hills, sky, clouds or rocks around me, but as evocations, through text and other layered visual elements. (Imants Tillers, 'When locality prevails', *Heat*, no. 8, new series, 2004, p. 14.)

We are all influenced by place, through climate, landscape and experiences from the present and the past. Even when we move, the memories of places move with us. Tillers uses place names to recall these layers of association.

Poetic combinations of words describing places and people draw attention to the ways in which meaning can be communicated. While at times the words and image convey a similar message or reinforce one another, at other times they appear in separate, less cohesive or even whimsical combinations. The viewer responds to the image as well as to the possibilities of words and phrases. In *Nature speaks* the passage of time is conveyed through the number of works in the series as well as through the repetition of certain elements. These include the letter T, the angels or cherubim, the word horizon and the phrase from French Symbolist poet Stephané Mallarmé, 'a throw of the dice will never abolish chance'. Coincidence is always an element to be noted and acknowledged in Tillers' work. Coincidence and chance point towards new connections from which meaning can be found. They are also like a playful thread of visual and verbal puns that animate the series.

- Many of the *Nature speaks* paintings contain cherubim taken from a drawing by Philipp Otto Runge, an early nineteenth-century German romantic artist who saw art as another form of nature.
- The word horizon is stencilled across many of the images, naming one of the compositional devices of a landscape painting. In collaborations Tillers undertook with Warlpiri artist Michael Jagamara Nelson, however, the phrase 'there is no horizon' appears, referring to the different approach to painting in much Aboriginal art, where the landscape is viewed from above. In these collaborations Jagamara Nelson often added the distinctive E shape, a symbol of his possum dreaming. These works in the *Nature speaks* series bring together two contemporary Australian artists in a dialogue about place, identity and painting.

ACTIVITY

- Write down words that evoke particular places and contrast them with their cultural or historic associations.
- Create a written timeline of a place you are familiar with. Show how this place has grown and changed. Choose three points along this line and create an image of these words layered over one another. Consider the size, colour and emphasis of different words.