

Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art

by Ian McLean

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The subtitle of this book, 'A History of Indigenous Australian Art', could mislead a reader into expecting to find in this book an account of Indigenous art, within a historical framework, from the ancient petroglyphs of the Burrup Peninsula to contemporary Indigenous art in all of its fabulous manifestations. That reader will be disappointed. Ian McLean's purpose in writing this book is quite different as he sets out to illustrate a thesis that he presents in the opening pages of his volume. Namely: 'This book is a history of how Indigenous artists engaged with, and responded to, this meeting with modernity and in the process became modern artists, eventually making for themselves a place in the discourse of contemporary art' (p. 11).

It is an account that is presented through a poststructuralist and postcolonial lens with terminology frequently drawn from critical theory and structural Marxism. He concludes that his 'book maps the discursive field of Indigenous art in the modern period, arguing that it has been a rich ground for transculturation' (p. 257). Within his intellectual framework, Bennelong's spearing of Governor Phillip is interpreted as an act of 'art performance' (p. 41); William Barak is the first Indigenous bourgeois artist (p. 56) who may have 'wanted to be part of the modern ethnographic project' (p. 57), while the art of the Western Desert is 'like so many Italian Renaissance city-states, [where] art centres began to appear in communities across remote Australia, each with its own look' (p. 147).

Ian McLean, who is a Senior Research Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Wollongong, has divided his account into three major sections: Empire, Nation and Post-Western. Within this structure appear the subsections 1) Origin Stories: Dreamtime in Botany Bay, 1770; 2) Indigenous art and empire in Sydney, 1788–1830; 3) Post-contact Indigenous art in the Australian colonies, 1835–1900; 4) Indigenous art in White Australia, 1900–1970; 5) The invention of Indigenous contemporary art, 1970–1990; 6) Remote masters, 1985–2015 and lastly 7) Post-identity: Urban Indigenous art, 1987–2015.

Although McLean's account of Indigenous art does touch on many of the major Aboriginal artists, especially from the post-1970 period, there are major lacunas that are difficult to comprehend. For example, there is no mention of the artists from the Torres Strait Islands and it is difficult to imagine how a comprehensive history of Indigenous art can be narrated without an understanding of the impact of artists including Dennis Nona, Alick Tipoti, Brian Robinson, Ken Thaiday, Ellen José, Clinton Nain and a host of others. While the medium of photography is given a degree of prominence throughout the text, printmaking, which is critical in any discussion of the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art in Australia, is largely ignored. The critical role played by Kevin Gilbert, as a visual artist, is ignored and, outside of Papunya Tula, many of the artists of the Western Desert are passed over in silence. Other significant artists, including Treahna Hamm and Karen Casey, who have played a significant and distinctive role on the national stage, are also omitted from this construct of history.

While this may be seen as a criticism, it needs to be kept in mind that McLean is arguing a thesis and has selected those artists who can be seen to illustrate his thesis and thus such sins of omission become inevitable. On the whole, the 149 illustrations in the book are of a high quality and some of the selected artists are generously rewarded with several illustrations of their work.

In an area that is so densely populated with significant artists as is Australian Indigenous art of the past half-century, there will inevitably be arguments over inclusions and omissions. McLean tactfully foresees this difficulty and writes, 'my second acknowledgement is to all those Indigenous Australian artists who do not appear in this history. They are there between the lines, holding up the text' (p. 285). His eloquence can only be applauded, even if his choices may be disputed.

McLean's argument, which he has rehearsed in a number of earlier publications, including his useful anthology of sources *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art* and *White Aborigines Identity Politics in Australian Art*, is presented in this book in far greater detail. He argues that Aboriginal artists encountered European modernity with the first contact and responded with

their own version of modernity. However, in this case 'aesthetics is a signifier of ancestral presence or Dreaming, rather than reified into a Kantian ideology in which abstract feelings of beauty and the sublime signify the individual subject's search for freedom' (p.19).

McLean's book presents a close reading of certain aspects of Indigenous art within the context of a rigorously pursued academic argument. Publications on Australian Indigenous art in recent years have created a crowded field in which *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* is a welcome newcomer. Readers seeking a good overall survey on the topic still have Wally Caruana's *Aboriginal Art* (Thames & Hudson) as the go to volume, which has now entered its third, updated edition.

Surely the time has arrived and we have matured sufficiently to have an Indigenous voice present a history of Indigenous art in this country. Hetti Perkins's *Art + Soul* was a wonderful and popular introduction to the topic, but the time is ripe for Indigenous people to take control of their own discourse on their own cultural traditions.

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