IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DREAM

Placing Australian aboriginal art within the context of the distant past and the more recent history of racism

BY GEORGINA MADDON

The struggle of aboriginal artists to have their work accepted as art, worthy of museums and galleries, reflects in many ways the arc of our own Warli, Madhubani and Good artists, although in the case of Australian Aboriginal art, the transition has been more rapid.

Aboriginal culture goes as far back as 60,000 to 80,000 years ago, when these communities first settled in Australia. The first evidence of their culture is to be found in the still visible rock art, more than 20,000 years old. It is heavily coded with symbolism, mythology and the sympathetic magic performed by shamans, who sought to conquer animal spirits before the hunt or appease forces of nature.

NGMA’s New Delhi exhibition, ‘Indigenous Australia: Masterworks from the National Gallery of Australia’, gives a valuable insight into this art and its wide range of works on display, featuring both traditional Aboriginal artists and contemporary practitioners, with a special emphasis on artists of mixed ancestry. The exhibition is drawn from NGMA’s extensive collection, among the largest of its kind in the world.

The work on show includes intricate ‘dot art’, drawings done with natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, decorated shields, carved boomerangs and masks.

There are also a striking collection of paintings on canvas and fabric made by contemporary Aboriginal artists: intricate paintings that speak of creation myths, in which ancestor spirits bring the world into being in a state of dreaming. This is represented in a stunning work, ‘Yanjily-piri Jukurrpa’ (Star Dreaming), made by three senior Warlpiri artists, Paddy Sims, Larry Spencer and Paddy Nelson.

It is one of the first large canvases to emerge from Yuendumu in the Northern Territory of Australia. It relates to the fire ceremony of the Warlpiri. According to folklore, participants of the fire ceremony shok smouldering branches and specks floated into the night sky to create the constellations — these are represented by circles and stars in the foreground while thick bands of colour in the background evoke the surface of the earth.

The Warlpiri-speaking Yuendumu people were the first Aboriginal community in the Western Desert region to begin painting for the art market. Although they made a hesitant start, they now have their own organisation, the Warlukurlangu Art Centre.

**Inverted view**

Interestingly, the gallery showcases the contemporary voices first. As you go further inside, you encounter the works produced by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from the late 1980s. This inverted view is a homage to the concept of the ‘usable past’ — of making sense of a national experience in ways that unify rather than separate peoples. The arrangement of the artworks underlines the issue of racial discrimination that has dogged the country for years.

In the contemporary section, one is struck by ‘Australism’, by Vernon Ah Kee, from Brisbane, Queensland. Ah Kee represents the Kuku Yalanji/Yidinji/Waayi/Gugu Yimidhirr/Koko Berrin peoples. His moving text-based work talks of racism. It begins by saying, “I am not racist, but I don’t know why Aboriginal people cannot look after their houses properly... and I am not racist but... they are very ungrateful people and... I am not racist but they never wore any clothes until the coming of the whites... I am not racist, but you know there are poor white people too...” and goes on to take apart the bigoted beliefs of the coloniser.

**Kitschy complicity**

Another disturbing work is ‘Ash on Me’, by Tony Albert, who belongs to the Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku Yalanji peoples from Townsville, Queensland. The installation is made up of ‘opportunity shop’ (charity shop) ceramic and metal ashtrays decorated with kitschy images of Aboriginal people and culture.

The old found objects, arranged in a way that spells out the word ‘Ash’, underline their original use and the casual racism hidden in them: cigarette butts are to be stubbed out on the faces of Aboriginal men, women and children.

When seen in a curio shop, these items may look kitschy enough to seem innocuous, but the

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