INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART

Exhibition:

Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson:
Three Colours
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Response and Riposte in the Art of Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson

Zara Stanhope

Part I: How Do You Think It Feels?
Common Ground?

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s respectively, Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson have been intent on exposing, commenting on, and reflecting on the experiences of being an Australian and a New Zealander. Their works enunciate and define present-day culture, contemplating the construction of national histories and societies post-colonisation, and reflect on the role of the artist and the contemporary art industry.

Personal backgrounds that include different degrees of indigenous ancestry have been central in the formation of both artists' projects, Bennett working primarily in painting and Robinson initially trained as a sculptor. This indigeneity has been important to their work to date, not only in foregrounding the issues addressed by their art but also in how each artist has come to think of themselves and how they distinguish their own identity, as distinct from the recognition of their work in the art world. Today both artists refuse to be labelled as indigenous artists, preferring their art not to be overwhelmed by the definitions of others.

This comes in a period of significant events in the development of our national identities. In Australia the according of voting rights and citizenship to Aboriginal people in 1967, land rights in the early 1990s after the Wik and Mabo cases and the refutation of terra nullius and other reforms under a Labour government, recent attempts to shift from participation in the Commonwealth to a Republic, and the Australian Liberal government's refusals to apologise for its past treatment of the colonised indigenous population since being elected in 1996 are all notable. In bi-cultural New Zealand, in accord with the Treaty of Waitangi signed by Maori and the British Crown in 1840 (in which Maori gave the Crown rights to govern and to develop British settlement, while the Crown guaranteed Maori full protection of their interests, status and full citizenship rights), legal claims and settlements for breaches of promise to Maori have been ongoing under the auspices of the courts and New Zealand government since 1977, with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal.

Visible in each artist's work are signs of indigenous history post-European arrival and the effects of social politics, and a confrontation with the perverse nature of other cultural and contemporary experiences. These honest responses, and the challenging riposte to the nature of our cultures and societies, emphasise the significance of the two practices.

The Three Colours exhibition and catalogue have been designed to present the work of each artist as a unit, each in parallel to the other. The objective is to bring their art into proximity (rather than comparison) in order to understand and to create dialogues between their oeuvres, to extend the conversation each artist inspires with their tactics of 'talking back'. Bennett and Robinson knew very little of each other's work, having never met. Three Colours is the first opportunity for their works to speak to each other.1

Divided into two parts, this curatorial overview examines in turn aspects of the individual ways Bennett and Robinson respond to and engage their cultures, addressing issues that risk being denied or ignored. In sympathy with Ross Gibson's description of a physical but also an imaginary 'badland', '… a disturbing place that you feel compelled to revisit despite

all your wishes for comfort or complacency'2 —both artists' creative strategies compel us to look again at difficult subject matter.

The Personal and the Political

As expected from art that addresses cultural and social identity, elements of self-portraiture can be detected in Bennett and Robinson's work. Unaware of his own aboriginality until the age of eleven3 and taking up art in 1986, this was the means for Gordon Bennett to deconstruct the discomforts of social conditioning as a 'white Australian'. 'By going to art college I was coming out saying, I am of Aboriginal descent, I am Aboriginal. This was a big step, letting people know. You can't believe how hard it was to just say those three words, I am Aboriginal.'4

Bennett's reflections on the abstract notion of identity disturb certain conventional perceptions regarding indigenous Australians —the hegemonic view of Aboriginal culture and history as structured by colonial discourse —and draw attention to the extensive ramifications of such thought for subject and viewer. Bennett's early works appear to have a cathartic sensibility. For viewers their contents challenge the Anglo-Saxon Australian version of history, hoping to stimulate understanding, acknowledgement and a revisiting of attitudes and social behaviour.

The Coming Of The Light (1987) is indicative of the anger with which much of Bennett's early work is imbued and its title an example of an ironical tone running through his practice. The title reflects Bennett's response to the Enlightenment notion of modern thought illuminating the darkness of the savage mind, the modernising project that undertook to 'civilise' 'primitive' indigenous populations.5 The invasion and imposition of urban European thought is symbolised by archetypal city buildings, a backdrop to a crowd of white faces staring wide-eyed at the sole black inhabitant, a decapitated jack-in-the-box suspended from a noose. The English language, tool of anthropology, ethnography and trade, marks the boxes that will carry the 'jacks' on their conveyor belt. The alphabet is Bennett's sign for commerce and capital, symbolic of the power residing in language, and, by association, western systems of thought.

Art was also the means by which Peter Robinson could address the question: 'What kind of Maori person was I, if at all?'6 With a great, great, great grandparent from the Maori iwi (tribe) Ngai Tahu, and choosing a career in art at a time of revived cultural and political interest in Maori identity, traditions and language, Robinson was stimulated to consider his Maori heritage at a deeper level: 'I am of Maori descent and maybe I'm aware of it, or completely unaware —but I've been de-tribalised. So when I started producing Maori art it was like I was part of a lost tribe that had lost its roots in Maoriness and was finding its own roots.'7

Tongue Of The False Prophet (1992), 3.125% (1994) and Untitled (1994) are indicative of Robinson's response, investigating and reviewing his personal position within the complexities of the New Zealand cultural condition. An example of what have become known as the 'percentage paintings', 3.125% (1994) typifies the interrogative position that Robinson pursued in responding to his 'Maoriness' in an opened-ended way, attending to the dualities within his personal situation and the larger bicultural situation, with its history of battle over sovereignty and rights: 'A large number of Robinson's works have centred on this issue —not just the tools and methods that the power culture in New Zealand has used to de-legitimise and diminish Maori cultural identity and Maori rights to lands and resources, but also the impact that such experiences have had upon the Maori people.'8

The percentage, 3.125, is the arithmetic proportion of Maori blood comprising Robinson's 'number whakapapa' or ancestry, a figure which could be considered sufficient or insufficient to claim cultural or social rights, depending on the choice of defining system; familiarity, blood or policy: 'And then they accuse you of jumping on the Maori art bandwagon. The percentage paintings were a way of exposing these kinds of attitudes. It is my belief that Maori identity is a matter of identifying yourself as Maori —belonging in terms of ancestral connections as opposed to being a concept of how much Maori you are in terms of blood quantities.'9

Blind Spots: The Future Lies in the Past

Having a long-standing interest in psychology and attending to current ideas in cultural theory, Bennett, like Robinson, utilises ideas prevalent in western postmodern thinking and art to effect a critical mode of visual communication that,

while speaking through images from other sources, also speaks about the self. Quotation and appropriation are perfect tools to employ to reflect and answer back to the instrumental causes of the past. Bennett has worked with these means for over a decade, taking on the benefits and risks associated with assuming the apparatus of the coloniser.10

Appropriation implicates not only the originating source of visual images but also the inherent licentiousness of all imagery in its ability to be manipulated. Social studies texts and the work of certain artists have been favourite sources for Bennett's embezzlement. Self Portrait (But I Always Wanted To Be One of the Good Guys) (1990) draws on both. In a childhood photograph Bennett, as the 'cowboy', stands firm in his identity, situated within a grid resembling the structure of classical perspective, containing segments from an imaginary and incomplete narrative. A version of New Zealand modernist painter Colin McCahon's iconic 'I AM' (a term associated with a sacred godhead, and figuring large in McCahon's Victory Over Death 2 (1970), a painting ungraciously given by the New Zealand government and now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra) is filled with a further naive and fanciful illustration of indigenous people. These interconnected images and the text 'I AM LIGHT I AM DARK' create an electrifying tension, mistrust at the process of the construction of identity, where instead there should be a dialogue between light and darkness.

Beyond a powerful but mournful reflection on the self and the psychic and social impact of racial difference and assimilation, Self Portrait (Good Guys) is a warning against the simplification and subsuming of identities, on social, scientific, political, religious or any other grounds. 'This is what my project is all about —not only through my art but in my coming to understand for myself that I am a measure of Australia and of Australian culture, that I was conditioned and socialised into this culture in a fairly average way. I feel that by deconstructing my false notions about myself and my Aboriginality then, in some way, I am also reflecting how that is being falsely reflected within Australian culture. So, there's this connection between my deconstructing this image in myself and deconstructing it in Australian culture.'11

Laconically derisory but on the mark, Robinson's work reflects divisions that operate in a bicultural social structure that seems generally well accepted, disturbed only slightly by events such as the party political manoeuvring by the opposition National Party leader Don Brash, who in early 2004 posited a future ideological and social direction expressed in the terminology 'one people'. Robinson's creative strategy has been to straddle both sides of social or political positions, in work supplying twofold interpretations. His riposte to contemporary concerns with identity and ethnicity or other issues is to lampoon political correctness. His polemic approach is reflected in critical responses to the Tongue Of The False Prophet. Described as either 'totems from a cargo cult or Pakeha (European) misinterpretation of Maori objects', its heterodox nature is implied as also tarnishing the artist as a deviant.

Robinson is, in his own words, 'part of a lost tribe, a tribe that has lost its Maoriness and is finding its own roots.' So in presenting these works as 'lost tribal artifacts' he is referring not to the loss of taonga (tribal treasures providing links with the past) but to his own detribalized identity and the new treasures that issue from it. He is the inhabitant of a new world and has to find his own way. His identity lies not in a tradition that tells him how and what to be, but in his passionate engagement with being "dazed and confused." In rejecting the noble tradition, Robinson's work appears heretical as contemporary Maori art. Indeed, he is less interested in finding solutions to a problem than in dwelling on, and even relishing, its complexities, its catch-22s.'12

Robinson's Percentage Paintings also provoked discussion on the slippery nature of identity from a Maori position: 'From a Maori perspective the Percentage Paintings may be perceived as marks of identity, as significant as the moko. Although the spiral that defines the numerical percentages exists as an isolated referential mark from Maori art, it assumes additional denotational signification through its perceived configuration as fingerprint. Such a reading displaces the patronising agenda with one of polemic recrimination. The accusation of "authenticity" is inverted to construct an opposing stance as a counterpoint to the colonial penchant for empirical order and statistical constructs. In such a worldview, calculations of Maoriness by measuring the percentage of one's blood are both irrelevant and meaningless. One is Maori because one has a whakapapa that is acknowledged and communicated with other Maori. The percentage game is a construct generated out of ignorance.'13

The undeniable legacy of ancestry is embraced by Robinson and Bennett in works acknowledging the complications of self

identity. Self Portrait (Ancestor Figures) (1992) is perhaps the most thorough document of Bennett's lineage in work of the early 1990s. Black and white photographs hang within small works surrounding a chest of drawers, an assemblage that transforms domestic fixtures into an altarpiece. A crucible for networking numerous pasts, this Self Portrait also suggests the separateness of ideologies, in the drawers labelled 'SELF', 'HISTORY', and 'CULTURE' and Bennett's constructivist drawings. Like the gridded floor, the black and white angels at the pinnacle of the work (angels of redemption or angels of death?), mark out Bennett's and others' genesis and futures.

Bennett employs the work of other artists to not only open up the form and content of images but also as a conduit for the self. Jill Bennett takes up the discussion of Bennett's mode of appropriation and its continued meaning in her essay in this catalogue.14 She argues that Bennett's appropriation is a means for closing the distance between the self and the surrounding world, a way of referring to the conditions of the self by speaking through admired others.

Colin McCahon's work is one sympathetic model (inescapable in New Zealand art) for an artist grappling with doubt and anger or interested in an examination of the self in its broadest meaning. Forms from McCahon's painting appear at different times in Bennett's works. In Angry (Scared Too, After Colin McCahon) (1992) Bennett echoes the voice of McCahon, an artist who dared to make work about questions that troubled him, and whose works resonated with the tensions between hope and doubt, the sacred and secular. The text used by McCahon, 'Am I Scared Boy (Eh)', in the Scared series of the mid 1970s, echoes Maori sentiments, being said to be inspired by a photograph of two Maori youths entering the Pakeha domain of an art gallery.15 Important in the context of Bennett's work, McCahon's practice was a conceptual and creative struggle, a spiritual, intellectual and economic tussle, driven by the desire to make 'signs and symbols for people to live by, rather than pictures on a wall at an exhibition' and by the desire to 'paint like Mondrian' (as McCahon saw Mondrian's work as the painting to end all painting)—'To make painting beat like, and with, a human heart'.16

Robinson cannot and does not want to escape McCahon's reach. Boy Am I Scarred, Eh! (1997) states the after-effect of McCahon's speculation, the psychic and scarring damage to Maori. Typically, there is also a flip side—right wing fear at the impact of extending financial and other 'privileging' to Maori. The spiral is also cast and recast in an inescapable cross-current between Maori and European symbolism. It is reminiscent of the circular aspect of the Maori koru, a distinctive spiral form, similar to that of a curving stalk or bulb, and represented in the red, black and white rafter patterns of a Maori whare (meeting houses). This symbol was interpreted formally and with some notoriety by Pakeha artist Gordon Walters, whose paintings of the 1960s were subsequently caught in the 1980s in the contentious status of appropriation: between assertions of exploitation and colonising of a spiritual symbol and being acclaimed stylistically for taking part in a national and international modernist abstract cannon. The genealogy of the spiral also contains Op art and sci-fi vortexes. Or alternatively, it resembles a fingerprint, the form adopted as the corporate logo of the revamped national Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongawera on its opening in 1998, part of the redefined bicultural identity continually developed as part of official government policy within New Zealand.

Boy Am I Scarred, Eh! is such a piece. The spiraling ever-decreasing circles in a koru pattern leave the impression of a thumbprint. This symbol is perhaps the most durable physical representation of an individual's identity that we have. That identity is celebrated because it is unique—no two thumbprints are ever the same. Yet when the issue of identity extends beyond the physical and into the cultural we are much less hospitable, as a society, towards deviations of the norm. In this piece the word 'scared' may also be seen as a play on 'scarred'. As our society sets about systematising, labeling and defining identity beyond the personal (and often beyond recognition), there is often a 'scarring' of those that do not fit neatly into the prescribed boxes and categorisations.'17

'History Is Not Opinion, It Is Truth.'
'I see much of my current work as History painting, not as a documentary History painting, but rather it is painting that investigates the way history is constructed after the event, always mediated by someone's point of view, a teleological one point perspective that reflects a Eurocentric bias.'18

Many of Bennett's paintings in the early 1990s included versions of perspectival and optical grids, black voids, dates

and signs, denoting the operation and effects of systems of thought applied by colonial governments and individuals in mapping and defining the land of Australia and its people. Haptic Painting (Explorer: The Inland Sea) (1993) mimics maps of journeys by Captain James Cook and William Dampier to the 'New World' in the southern hemisphere. The route is coloured by fields of dots and violent slashes of red, forms both indigenous and modern. At the centre of Australia, the explorer figure, often employed by Bennett, reaches in vain toward a dot circle as he sinks in the Inland Sea. Symbolic black hand prints stain the route of the ships' journeys, signs of warning and symbols of powerlessness. A tiny group of black figures is overwhelmed within Bennett's imagery. His reworking of history's methodology shatters the simplistic form and meaning of its visual narrative.

Bennett's revisions refute the silencing or essentialising conducted by constructions of Aboriginality that lock tradition in time. The Aboriginalist (Identity of Negation: Flotsam) (1994) attacks such imperialistic and offensive attitudes continuing in the construction of culture today. The belittling of indigenous people—labelled, displaced, incorporated without permission into commerce and design, 'treated like dirt'—is overtly apparent in the iconography of the work. As a throwing stick and deadly weapon, the reference to the Nulla-Nulla, with its 'fast, cleansing action', is insulting as well as terrifying. The collaged appropriation within the painting, in its fabricated dot screen method and relationship to Roy Lichtenstein's references to the reproductive processes of image making, and the grid laid over the 'landscape' of the floor piece, are metaphors for the perspectives and processes that defined 'Aboriginalism'.

'I am attempting to make it clear in my work that these are constructed images. I am trying to make the way of seeing in the picture obvious with the use of perspective lines; how perspective constructs images as well as histories.'19

Bennett's employment of the mirroring, depicted in The Coming of the Light, is a concept the artist takes from the analytic tools of psychology, and which he employs conceptually and literally. The mirrored interior of the box in The Aboriginalist (Identity of Negation: Flotsam) reinforces the implication of the viewer in the psychic and physiological containment, negation and 'whitening' of Indigenous Australians.

Understandably, Bennett's oeuvre until recently has been described as history painting, of regrettable rather than grand narratives: 'Bennett is a history painter; but the past he affirms is the phantom shadows of those trodden under the feet of the victorious.'20 Interested in exposing the unconscious in historic minds and in contemporary imagination, Bennett's archaeological mission has been to reveal the forgotten texts and subtexts implicated in understandings of personal and national identity.

In a similar phenomenon to Bennett, many aspects of Maori tradition and cultural forms are too distant for Robinson to relate to his life and art except through abstract references. Early in his career, he abandoned the search for access to cultural meaning through historical forms, recognising their homogeneity and, finally, lack of authenticity for his work. The cultural references appearing in this work have been refined across the 1990s to act as increasingly conceptual ciphers of New Zealand history as well as notes on contemporary experience. Robinson works, as does Bennett, within a Pakeha or European methodology, whilst at the same time suggesting that western epistemology cannot be trusted.

Abstract in form, Robinson's sculptural works in the early 1990s are deceivingly visceral. Tongue of the False Prophet (1992) ruminates on Pakeha misunderstanding and mistreatment of Maori. Numerous ideas are conflated in the four forms, the shapes being a response to Robinson's interest in the 'intriguing' forms of Maori waka tupapaku (burial chests) and tiki wanaga (god sticks). These historical objects are the source for the single eye, which also appears in The Great Plane Race (1998) and Fag Time (2003), the form catching Robinson's attention in the Maori belief that on death elders take their place in the sky. More violent settler history and its mythologising is hinted at through the juxtaposition of legend (a one-eyed human face in older Maori carvings which may represent either a demi-god who lived on the land and in the sea, or a one–eyed monster, part fish, part god and part man) and Robinson's materials and form. The injurious nature of the contact, exchange and co-existence between Maori and Pakeha are represented materially by; the blanket (traded by Pakeha to Maori but often resulting in death when damp or infected), tar (harmful tobacco), fake gemstones (taking advantage of inequality) and alphabet soup noodles (the letters foreign in sound to Maori and so symbolising the assimilation and potential loss of language). The work conflates the personal, cultural and historical: 'The forms in this

work were positioned as mutants, caricatures of preconceptions of the primitive, false tongues. Nevertheless such surface primitivism typecast Robinson's work as Maori.'21

Retaining the attributes of a 'naive style', and adding text to the percentages in the early 1990s, Robinson repeated and amplified the complexity of visual communication and translation of meaning between cultures. Untitled (1994) indicates these characteristics.22 Evoking dual and dubious politics, the crate is a container for imports or exports, a by-product in selling off or buying up: 'At first glance Robinson's work appears to be a crass celebration of commercialism. But his parade of commercial slogans is an over-investment in their surface values, an ironic demonstration of the ways in which cultural stereotypes are maintained and dispersed within global economies. It is also a means of profiling his business as an artist of mixed blood working in an art-world which currently trades in issues of ethnic identity.'23

Again raising the deadly effects of European contact on Maori, Robinson also questions the perception of Pakeha making takeover bids for New Zealand's resources, land and people, and of course the reverse colonising process: a Maori 'sell out' to financial settlements under the Treaty of Waitangi or exploitation of culture for a fast dollar. Speaking in generalities, no one escapes Robinson's barb —iwi that have achieved economic success, companies that have frittered away settlements on unsuccessful sports teams —let alone himself, an artist leaving home to seek success in Europe. 'DIRT CHEAP'. 'CASH IN TODAY'.

An up-side-down plane clad in red, white and black, The Great Plane Race (1998) suggests the artist and his whanau have arrived.24 The work establishes the artist's home in the Antipodes —a realm beneath and the wrong way up in the European version of the origins of civilisation. The accepted wisdoms haunting Bennett's explorer figure began in the minds of late medieval and Renaissance Europeans, who mentally imagined the antipodes (after their own experience) before the great southern lands and their peoples were confirmed.

The Great Plane Race has attracted numerous interpretations; the body of its simplified form could suggest a waka (a Maori canoe and the historical and mythological bearer of the original ancestors to Aotearoa), a sign of genealogy. Colin McCahon's Jet Out drawings are another precedent. McCahon depicted the plane, with the bird, as symbolic of the Maori notion of the soul's flight after death. In the Ratana faith, a Christian faith originating in New Zealand, the plane had another association with spiritual leadership. The fabric of the work; white linen, red blankets and black velvet, ambiguously communicates the colours associated with Maori heritage while narrowing cultural complexity into base (blanket) and exotic (velvet) materials.

'Settlement Not Invasion, Massacres Never Happened'
'You are right if you are white, I am wrong.'25

'White is right.'26

The work of Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson is important for challenging and shaping contemporary cultural thought as it encourages reflection on historical and social behaviour, as seen through the lens of modernity and postmodernity. Apart from Bennett's self-portrait, indigenous Australians appear in Bennett's art second hand, generically represented, depicted as 'noble savages' subsisting in the bush or molded into kitsch, decorative aboriginalia. Fatally, they are figures hanging from jail cell windows. These representations mimic the political construction of the identity of indigenous people and Australian culture and underline essentialising and aberrant assumptions of racial authenticity and originality haunted by tradition.

Unable to have an indigenous culture passed down from a family member, Bennett must express his aboriginality through non-traditional forms or means, and his art reflects his exploratory relationship to his indigeneity: 'You have to understand my position of having no designs or images or stories on which to draw to assert my Aboriginality. In just three generations, that heritage has been lost to me. Dots are my bridge to my Aboriginality. They connect to their obvious relationship to the Western Desert paintings and in their relationship to reproductions and representation (the photos of

my grandmother and mother). I am continually searching for ways to connect, to express my Aboriginality, and dots obsess me for now.'27

The theoretical interest in exploring the disruption and multiplicity of identity that accompanied postmodernity opened opportunities for artists to expose and complicate personal and cultural identities, and sometimes impersonate others. Bennett refuses to let the abuse of authority that attended modernisation escape being implicated in the ideological, cultural and political structuring of Australia, and by association, other neo-colonial societies. Gone Primitive (1992) riffs the modernist romance with 'primitive cultures', the aesthetic western attraction to aspects of non-western cultures in particular. Bennett's postmodernist legacy is the collage of his childhood photograph on the cover of Marianna Torgovink's publication Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives. The indigenous body as a denotation for modernist originality, childlike, untainted and full of life, appears in the more recent Home Decor paintings from the mid to late 1990s and other later works in figures —'motifs' —which Bennett appropriates from Margaret Preston's designs.

Looking to stimulate the development of a national Australian art from the 1920s, in true modernist spirit Preston in laying claim to aspects of a 'primitive other' to forward national identity, encouraged close observation and utilisation of Aboriginal art in her writings, advice which she applied to her practice.28 Appropriating the formal originality she observed in Aboriginal art over the next twenty years, Preston gradually acknowledged, to some extent, the cultural and spiritual qualities of indigenous art, attempting to shift from formal appropriation to a conceptual working process in exploring her understanding of the nature of indigenous art making. Her abstract 'stylisation' of indigenous art, symptomatic of a wider exploitation of Australian Aboriginal people and art in the twentieth century, caricatured and misrepresented people and their culture.29 In the Home Decor (Algebra) paintings, Preston's bodies are trapped behind, and woven within, the intellectual rigidity and uniformity of western modernity, symbolised by Piet Mondrian-like grids or de Stijl schemes.

In the sampling, and cut and paste mode of these works, tuned to the improvisation of Piet Mondrian's Boogie Woogie, Bennett mixes and collages Preston along with his own earlier images and other sources including Kasimir Malevich, Philip Guston and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Bennett allows avant-garde abstraction its role as an extreme mode of rationalisation and violent decorporalisation, as could be seen implicated in the claim for transcendence and unity behind the purity of abstraction sought by Mondrian and de Stijl, to represent the impersonal industrial aesthetic coming from imperialistic art capitals under modernism. Paradoxically, the geometry of the abstraction of Mondrian or Malevich also cleared a space for imaginative projection and reverie: 'Within the modernist grid of Mondrian's spiritualist universality and Preston's stylistic utilitarianism, I hope to further explore a history of ideas, the history of events and spaces between the binary opposites that form their foundation, and which form our sense of ourselves.'30

Nicholas Thomas also looks at the 'unstable duality' characteristic of appropriation and sees in Preston's second hand borrowing and processing of indigenous cultural production, evidence of useful attention being drawn to neglected indigenous art traditions in the 1940s.31

The inevitable failure of all thought, modernist and contemporary, to explain not only the complexities of cultures but also the universe, is at work in Robinson's works made for the installation Divine Comedy.32 In this speculative realm, the bubbles of Inflation Theory (2001) could equally model cosmological or economic theories and Null and Void (2001), formed from the negative space within the numeral zero in Gills Sans font, is both existential and technological. With the related prints, these works confound meaning, as all theories are ultimately challengeable. They enunciate the paradoxical exchanges and disjunctions between different approaches to knowledge; spiritual, empirical and mythological, modern and post modern. The works of both artists pronounce that there can be no high ground, no authenticity but the importance of acknowledging multiple origins and different contexts.

1. It is not the first contextualising of these artists' practices. Pennie Hunt's essay in this publication reflects research conducted for her MA thesis The Mirror and the Microscope: Blood in the Art of Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson School of Fine Arts, University of Melbourne, 2001, unpublished.
2. Ross Gibson Seven Versions of an Australian Badland University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002, p15.
3. Gordon Bennett interviewed in Bob Lingard 'A Kind of History Painting' Tension 17 August 1989, p39.
4. Quoted in Jennifer Isaacs 'Gordon Bennett' Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings And Prints University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1992, p53.
5. 'The Coming of Light deals with a questioning of faith; a crisis of disbelief. It relates specifically to the 1959 Elias series of paintings by the New Zealand artist

Colin McCahon. The words "WILL HE COME/LET BE/LET BE/WILL ELIAS COME TO SAVE HIM" were uttered by onlookers at Christ's crucifixion in response to his cry 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' This painting is thus a shared vision of McCahon's response and 1959 interpretation of this event. However, I have relocated the event to the fringe of a city—it being a concrete model for the perpetual growth of 'modernity' inherent in that ethnocentric notion of 'progress'. I have interpreted the event in terms of supplanting an indigenous belief system with a Eurocentric model which is implied in the statement 'The Coming of the Light (to illuminate the Savage mind)'. The arm that holds the light also holds the noose and thus relates to a Judas betrayal. Gordon Bennett 'The Coming of the Light' Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1990, pp46-7.
6. In conversation with the artist, 6 March 2002.
7. Peter Robinson from 'Megan Tamati-Quennell In Conversation with Peter Robinson' Planet 14 1994, p60; quoted in Localities Of Desire: Contemporary Art in an International World Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1994, pp65-6.
8. Hana O'Regan 'Peter Robinson' Home and Away: Contemporary Australian And New Zealand Art from the Chartwell Collection (ed. William McAloon) Auckland Art Gallery, 1999, p56.
9. Peter Robinson 'Megan Tamati-Quennell In Conversation With Peter Robinson', op cit., p60.
10. 'I see the opening out of history as leading to a broader and deeper understanding of the world and of my identity as a human being. It is a holistic and integrative approach as opposed to a narrow modern linear approach.' Gordon Bennett 'Re-writing History' Southern Crossings Camerawork, London, 1992, p28; and also in Gordon Bennett (artist's statement) Strangers in Paradise: Contemporary Australian Art to Korea Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992, p22.
11. Gordon Bennett 'Gordon Bennett: Artist' Aboriginal Voices: Contemporary Aboriginal Artists, Writers and Performers (ed. Liz Thompson) Simon and Schuster, Brookvale, 1990, p148.
12. Robert Leonard '3.125% Pure: Peter Robinson Plays the Numbers Game' Art And Text 50 1995, p20.
13. Robert Jahnke 'A Commentary' Kororangi: New Maori Art Auckland Art Gallery, pp42-3.
14. Ian McLean sees Bennett's tactic as transformative: 'Appropriation, or theft, is not as it might seem, a way of accumulating other identities, but a tactic which breaks their codes of representation so that all identities are reduced to a commodity, or objects of exchange. Bennett's dilemma is very different. Caught between two cultures, he adopts a strategy of translation rather than appropriation. The strategy is founded on two tasks: to remember, not to forget; to recentre, not to decentre.' Ian McLean 'Psycho(dr)ama Mirror Line: Reading Gordon Bennett's Installation Mirrorama' Third Text 25 Winter 1993-4, p79.
15. Gordon Brown Colin McCahon: Artist A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984, p170.
16. Colin McCahon (1974) quoted in Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys Auckland Art Gallery, 1988, p78.

17. Hana O'Regan, op cit., p56.
18. Gordon Bennett 'Re-writing History' Southern Crossings Camerawork, London, 1992, p22.
19. Gordon Bennett interviewed in Bob Lingard, op cit., p39.
20. Ian McLean 'Angel of History' Third Text Vol. 16, No. 2, June 2002, p212.
21. Greg Burke 'Cultural Safety' Cultural Safety City Gallery, Wellington, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1995, p23.
22. Untitled was made for the exhibition Cultural Safety: Contemporary Art from New Zealand curated by Gregory Burke and Peter Weiermair for Frankfurter Kunstverein in association with the City Gallery, Wellington, in 1995. The crate previously was used in importing car parts to New Zealand.
23. Greg Burke, op cit., p23.
24. This would have been especially so at its first showing, in Germany as part of Toi Toi Toi: Three Generations of Art from New Zealand Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, January-April 1999.

25. Gordon Bennett Penance 1995; ballpoint, watercolour and collage; 7 parts; 19.5 x 13.5 cm each; collection of the artist.
26. Peter Robinson Nice Paintings Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1997.
27. Gordon Bennett in Bob Lingard, op cit., p42.
28. See Margaret Preston 'The Indigenous Art of Australia' Art in Australia Vol. 3, No 11, March 1925; Margaret Preston 'From Eggs to Electrolux' Art In Australia Vol. 3, No. 22, March 1927; Margaret Preston 'The Application of Aboriginal Designs' Art In Australia Vol. 3 No. 31, March 1930; Margaret Preston 'Painting in Arnhem Land' Art in Australia Vol. 3, No. 81, November 1940; Margaret Preston 'Aboriginal Art' Art in Australia Vol. 4, No. 2, June 1941; and Margaret Preston 'My Monotypes' Margaret Preston's Monotypes (ed. Ure Smith) Ure Smith, Sydney, 1949.
29. See Ann Stephen 'Margaret Preston's Second Coming' Art Network 2 Spring 1980, pp14-5.
30. Bennett quoted in Terry Smith 'Australia's Anxiety' History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett Ikon Gallery Birmingham, and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, 1999, p19.

31. For Thomas appropriation is inevitably a hybrid, combining 'taking and acknowledgement, appropriation and homage, a critique of colonial exclusions, and collusion in imbalanced exchange'. Nicholas Thomas Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture Thames and Hudson, London, 1999, p141.

32. Divine Comedy, with Jacqueline Fraser's A demure portrait of the artist strip searched << with 11 details of bi-polar disorder>> was Bi-polar, New Zealand's inaugural representation at the Venice Biennale. 49th Venice Biennale, New Zealand Pavilion, Museo di Sant'Apollonia, Venice, Italy, 2001.

PART II: … And When Do You Think It Stops?

Three Colours: Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson takes its title from what are known as the traditional Maori colours and the three colour elements of the Aboriginal flag. This idea is deployed as a linking device, to connect the practices of Peter Robinson and Gordon Bennett, not to refer to the artists but to herald their art as contemporary vehicles 'through which to negotiate the complexities of culture and identity.'1

As symbols of the race, identity, culture and pride of a people, each set of three colours is a relatively recent designation. The black, red and yellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standard originated in the politicised Australia of the 1960s, the decade when indigenous people were finally recognised as Australian citizens.2 The black, red and white associated

with Maori, are the dominant decorative colours inside Maori meeting houses, in the culturally significant forms of kowhaiwhai rafter paintings and taniko weaving.

Avoiding categorisation as Maori or Indigenous respectively, Robinson and Bennett endeavour to ensure that their work operates in a third space between black and white.

Native Tongues

Alongside the visual image, Bennett and Robinson acknowledge the power and variability of meaning available to the possessor of language. Robinson's vernacular idiom, seen in rough handwritten statements and colloquial speech, projects a type of terror at its base sentiments.

His drawings obstinately reject good taste and iterate wayward subject matter. Attuned to popular culture or conversational sayings, (for example 'I think I'm turning Japanese' or 'Our Place'), Robinson can detect and air, noncommittally, incisive social and political sentiments of the day. Perversely reflecting reality, his expressionistically styled works on paper —such as Big Al Kaida and Let's Blow This Joint (2002) —also reflect a perverse world: 'Many of the slogans in Robinson's work are written in 'dumbspeak' —a naive tongue which recalls the staccato language of graffiti and billboards, representing the substitution of off-the-cuff, often provocative, generalisations for intelligent and considered discussion.'3

Robinson's signature style plays on the commodity value of originality while rejecting the aesthetic values of high art and deflecting the authority and finality of the English language. He is never literate in the way that Bennett's lists suggest attention to nuance. Robinson's turns of phrase evoke a hackneyed low culture, bereft of much imagination. Often his phrases suggest voices resigned to the realisation that mastering the language does not guarantee success.

The Strategic Plan series presents Robinson's vision for international dominance (in the universal lingua franca of English) in the late 1990s. Humorously referring to his inability to master the local language ('scuzi', 'preygo'), against his own advice Robinson plays his dominant card: the ability of Maori to speak in a different tongue.

Variability of meaning and the dependence of language on context are discussed by Jenny Harper in her essay in this catalogue, which reflects on Robinson's Pakeha Have Rights Too (1996). This work gained notoriety with various groups and individuals for being construed as racist. Made as Robinson's reaction to the extreme positions taken by right wing politicians Winston Peters in New Zealand and Pauline Hanson in Australia at the time, it continues to have renewed relevance.

Through association, Bennett creates an equivalence between vernacular, derogatory prose and the English alphabet, which becomes an iconography conveying the dysfunctionality of a supposedly sophisticated regime of communication: 'My aboriginal identity was delineated by racist language such as 'Abo', 'Boong', 'Coon', 'Darkie' and the always popular 'Nigger'. I realised early in life that language directs the perceptions of its users giving them ways to categorise, analyse and reify experience. Thus one conceptual basis for my paintings springs from the correspondence of the first letter of each derogatory word to the first letters of the alphabet—A.B.C.D.—an alphabet being a basic set of signs fundamental to the construction of language.'4

The capital letters referring to these racist words create a code for the violent potential of language, and similarly other systems of organisation prone to discriminatory application: 'I am interested in the ethnocentric boundaries implicit in language as a categorising system. These boundaries are as invisible as the perspective lines that create illusionistic depth in Western painting. The illusion of a harmonious whole, I see much of my work as history painting, not as a documentary history painting, but rather painting that investigates the way history is constructed after the event, always mediated by a point of view, a teleological/ one-point perspective that reflects a euro-centric bias.'5

Language is also often employed dramatically, reflecting a sense of disagreement over definition, often with punitive intents. The aphorisms and tautologies of Bennett's Penance 1995, repeated phrases written in ballpoint, are reminiscent of school punishments: 'I won't be an uppity nigger no more.' 'Settlement not invasion, Massacres never happened.' 'History is not opinion, it is truth.' 'I am not a human being, I am a minority.' 'Truth is a quality of faith, faith is belief, so belief is truth.' 'Truth is right, white is might, might is right, so truth is white.' 'You are right if you are white, I am wrong.' With the added drawings of stylised jail windows, the maxims take on a more horrific meaning; of a Kafkaesque, lifelong submission to those bars.

'Stop—No More', the words of Bennett's Untitled (No More) (1993) etched out like welts, are provocative ripostes—scarifications and psychic scars—their reiteration suggesting a lack of reception of the initial plea. Bennett frequently lists and hence, connects words, as in Notes to Basquiat: Culture Bag (1999). Infinitely extendable, these lists are labyrinthine in their permutations and fluid in their interpretation: 'The inclusion of text in the paintings reads something like spoken-word lyrics or poetry … Any viewer of the work will no doubt be drawn to recite the text in their mind as they read it, so the work acts to enter the viewer, something like a song can 'stick in the mind', or a poem can create an image in one's mind. Poetry doesn't seek closure on its meaning. I think it seeks to go beyond the words on paper into a world of metaphor, allegory, images and ideas.'6

The words in Regret, painted by Bennett in 2003, convey the stalled position of Australian Aboriginal and national identity, with no likelihood of an official government apology for past behaviour toward initial inhabitants or commitment to reconciliation. The 'tough little guys' in Regret could symbolise Prime Minister John Howard who, after offering his 'personal regret and sorrow' for the past policies which historically separated children from their families, has subsequently refused to make an official apology. Politically, Australia compares badly against New Zealand's legislated biculturalism, return of land ownership and reconciliation under terms interpreted from the Treaty of Waitangi. In monetary terms, the government has provided $NZ 675 million to date out of a possible several billion dollars of reparation, under the vision of reconciliation with the past and creation of a future for two peoples as one nation. The words listed in Regret create a complex interplay of language, sound and meaning. From poetry to satire, signs to nonsense verse, Bennett's roll calls are as incendiary as Robinson's slogans.

N.Z. ... Please Have Pity

A work of Peter Robinson's from 1995 reads 'My country stinks. Yours better.' As well as the perceived imbalances and privileges in power at home, Robinson addresses the intellectual and cultural issues that occur between countries. The artist is perpetually in a minority, in a diaspora, or on a trade mission. Responding to and also turning bicultural conditions to his own use, Robinson exposes cultural and personal displacement at a global level while capitalising on the perceived exoticism of his work.

Living mainly in Germany from the mid 1990s to 2002, Robinson has had opportunity to contemplate the effect of cultural difference on interpretations of his work. Moving between different languages, traditions and from 'the periphery' to one centre of the art world, he has focused on the questions of what sort of art can establish communication and dialogue with culturally specific audiences, in the process ascertaining the impact of cultural translation and personal dislocation. A set of iconic images, texts and objects were the result. Some, like the spiral and statements such as 'Boy am I Scared Eh!' or 'Everything must go', are familiar from earlier work. To these are added a wealth of images and items that model the global environment and ideas that circulate trans-nationally.

Not having a studio in Germany, Robinson made works that were generally easily constructed, assembled and dismountable. Attache cases and toolboxes were the perfect containers for a raft of contents: images, mirrors, texts, objects and small sculptures that could be mixed and matched, to spill randomly about the case and just as easily be packed away. Kargo Kult Koffer (1999) is typical of these flexible works, a type of universe, not just an imaginary museum in box. The most extreme of these re-scalable works was the dense floor piece The End Of The Twentieth Century (1999–2000) (a different and less condensed work, In Search of the Umworld, was made for the 1998 Sydney Biennale).

These barrages of contemporary experience —comic heroes, cult leaders or low culture stars and other figures sampled from the media, icons from planetary diagrams, symbols of travel, and texts, often written back to front—are instances and assortments of existence: 'Robinson's work can be interpreted to represent both the virtues and sickness of what he describes as an 'incredibly compelling era'—the rubble in the wake of cultural and technological revolutions, the information overload, the visual barrage, the simulacrum of reality.'7 The combined elements of these works reflect the often alien nature of reality, of being that simultaneously combines its otherness.

Bennett finds sympathy in shared experiences and in American culture, specifically in the figure and work of Jean-Michael Basquiat. In his Basquiat works, Bennett creates a relation between the different cultural contexts of Brisbane today and New York in the 1970 and 1980s. In many works since the mid 1990s, such as Notes to Basquiat (Culture Bag) (1999) Bennett references and appropriates Basquiat as a coda to Basquiat's work, to 'highlight the similarities and cross-connections of our shared experience as human beings living in separate worlds that each seek to exclude, objectify and dehumanize the black body and person.'8 In Culture Bag, Basquiat's shadow lurks behind Bennett, whose suitcase of 'CULTURE' contains only broken bottles. The sum of Malevich + Basquiat + Bennett = Citizen, Citizen representing possibly the hoped-for everyman (and artist) encumbered, but not positioned, by all narratives of the past.

There Is No God, Only Being and Nothingness

The void is a pervasive concept, as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth. Gustave Flaubert and Arthur Rimbaud, Philip Guston and John Cage, were, like Jean-Paul Sartre, drawn to the edge of the abyss, a site of creative and conceptual ambiguity.

A sense of absence is palpable in many of the works in Three Colours. The Percentage Paintings mark a lack of unity or wholeness, blackness in both artists' works can be read as indicative of the lack of recognition of indigenous rights and identity, reconciliation is a regrettable non-starter and the zero level of culture or intellect promised by the Kargo Kult suitcases is signposted to lead to 'NOWHERE' and 'NO FUTURE'. For the number of ways non-entity can be rehearsed in English, consider Bennett's list of words in Notes To Basquiat (Culture Bag) (2002).

Zero Red Shift (2001), with Inflation Theory, Null and Void and the prints Sartre's Worm and The Presence and Absence of God comprised, in large, Robinson's installation Divine Comedy, a speculation on the concept of nothingness.9 The abstract forms allow western epistemology (theories of the nature of time, space and matter) to be conflated with mythological and spiritual conceptions of the beginnings of existence. Robinson's fragmented and finely finished forms are unruly in their lack of discrimination between scientific explanations of the universe (think Stephen Hawking and his A Brief History of Time) and cultural and religious theories on being. Science and the hand of God tussle invisibly for prominence.

Language and translation again play a central part, even in these abstractions. Dante's poetry and an evolutionary scientism that disavows God as the creator meld in The Presence and Absence of God. Robinson converts the full text, 'There is no god, only being and nothingness', into the ones and zeros of ASCII computer language. Jean-Paul Sartre's quotation in Sartre's Worm, 'Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm', conjoins conceptually existential darkness and wormholes. Written twice in a curling, spiral form seen before in Robinson's work, Sartre's Worm is undeniably Maori, an exaggerated koru motif toned in white and red on black. A chain of connections is literally present in Zero Red Shift, acrylic zeros shaped after the fonts available to Robinson on computer.

It is difficult to believe that Robinson, searching for a truly international language and a non-cultural construct, fell into the very impossibility of such a condition by employing recognisably Maori colours. His genealogy can also be detected 'in the digital code itself, for the digits 10 can also be read as the word 'Io', which relates to Maori concepts of creation and to the concept of kore. The closest translation of kore means nothing, but isn't nothing, for Maori cosmology does not include a concept for nothing as an absolute. Io itself has been translated as the 'parentless one', indicating the point of genealogical origin, the being from which all beings descend.'10

Robinson's comedy is not only a joke at the expense of Pakeha science, a nod to the incompleteness of any one epistemology and the impossibility of escaping Colin McCahon's legacy (the Cartesian exaltation of existence in 'I AM'). These works continue his riposte to art's sell out of content. Minimalism, Op art and design, the later rapidly subsuming the identity of visual art, are returned to in these works, along with the inadequacy of western rationalism: 'In reviving illusionistic pattern, Robinson recalls the work of New Zealand's Bridget Riley, Gordon Walters. Walter's abstract modern appropriation of Maori design, and in particular his optical stylisation of the koru motif, has become the template of bi-cultural corporate logos that are ubiquitous in New Zealand. These designs form a perverse vocabulary. In them a nineteenth century desire for vernacular design achieves an unlikely marriage with the modernist abstraction that ruled romantic nationalism out.'11

In this black hole for positivism and unitary meanings, Robinson has a soul mate in Gordon Bennett. Bennett's juxtapositions of Renaissance perspective and grid lines over inky and welt-lined blackness evoke a void that is not only related to a loss of political identity and connectedness with the land but also conveys psychological and physical trauma. This is bought to mind in Self Portrait: Interior/Exterior (1993) and acted out by the artist in Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt (Violence and Grief Remix) (1995).

Panorama: Cascade with Floating Points of Identification (1993) is not a traditional landscape vista making a visual claim across territory to the horizon but a scene where the forces of modernity (in the form of Pollock's drips) have been at their bloody work. The scenery comprises a scared and blackened view, of a subject practically beyond identification. By association, the land is damaged and its people dislocated and lost from sight, as enacted by terra nullius and its presumption of the primitivist nature of the original inhabitants. Bennett's blackness is never all concealing; it fails to smother the excesses of history or the scars of suffering.

Robinson's assertions of 'NO WHERE' or 'NO FUTURE' resonate with works by Bennett that raise the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody. A cross, Malevich black square and barred window offer no solutions to this tragedy in How to cross the void (1993) or other works such as Mask and Doorway (2003) (blood seeping under a prison door), Penance (1995) (7 panels of 'aphorisms'), A Black Heart (1993) (a McCahon-like composition containing a prison door and the text 'a black heart isn't so bad/wall of death') and the homage to Albert Namatjira, Valley of the Ghost Gums (1989), in which the final panel depicts an angel attending the figure of the artist in jail.

Rebel, Rebel

A final strategy that is common to these two artists is the reflection in their works on issues of indigeneity at personal and cultural levels but their individual refusal to be categorised as a Maori or Aboriginal artist. Bennett was concerned early in his career at the quick success of his own work in the market, and Robinson has been anxious not to be codified as working in a postcolonial identity discourse.12 Why refuse this genealogical and cultural signifier when it is formative to their own identity?

The answer lies in both the generalisation and stereotyping of any such label, an issue that both artists have worked to deflate through a 'politics of difference.'13 The nature of the art market and the consequences for their work are also factors. Neither artist desires to take the tokenistic role of being spokesperson and risk reinscribing a dominant voice. Both can only be wary of effects of European scientific and ideological racism and its definitions of culture: 'I have my own experiences being crowned in Australia, as an 'Urban-Aboriginal' artist—underscored as that title is by racism and 'primitivism'—and I do not wear it well.'14 Robinson and Bennetts' works address and challenge, the notion of authenticity, the (im)possibility of a shared single heritage, and how the self can be characterised—by blood, lifestyle, culture, belief, or politics.

Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi elucidate Bennett's repudiation of indigenous labelling while acknowledging how his work prefaces the importance of history, tradition and culture: 'Bennett refuses to accept this view of Aboriginality as a singular

monolithic subject, a homogeneous group possessing of a set of uniform sociological and anthropological characteristics which elide specific cultural, historical and economic contexts. For Bennett, identity is always contingent upon a politics in which the issue of the speaking position is central. In the dominant colonial discourse, Aboriginal people are not provided a subject position; there is no space from which they can speak. In his work, Bennett is constantly putting forward and problematising his own speaking position. It is a position that is neither fixed nor unitary. Bennett explores the boundaries of his own Aboriginality, showing them to be complex, constantly being framed by a personal history defined both in terms of a memory as well as a political engagement with the issues concerning the production and consumption of art.'15

By attempting to avoid an indigenous positioning of their art, Bennett and Robinson look to reducing the risk of being defined as 'other' against a non-indigenous hegemony. However, while Robinson actively capitalises on any anthropological, ethnological or other code of discrimination when it can be a marketable ploy, neither he nor Bennett can avoid interpretations placed on their works in the public realm. Art's understanding is enacted within a multiplicity of reception and critical construction.

Art As Industry

'Bennett's art of the early to mid 1990s is, among other things, a plea for Australian art to shake off its deep complicity with regard to the national imagination. Aboriginal and Australian art, to this day defined against each other by a constitutional difference that sets the stage for the mythology of Australian national identity, are both inventions of a settler desire for legitimacy. Bennett's refusal to participate in this game of representation by rejecting the label of 'Aboriginal' is not due to an antipathy towards indigenous issues, but to his focus on the very language systems that deny Aborigines a place in the constitution of Australian identity. Even though art and artists identified as Aboriginal became fashionable in the 1990s, this status only confirmed their essential difference that set them apart from Australian art and its history, and allowed them to be colonised and objectified in the institutional discourses of Australian nationhood.'16

This issue of the reception of art and its relation to the nature of production raises the question of what constitutes contemporary indigenous art. The market for Australian aboriginal art was shaped predominantly during the 1980s by neo-colonial western centres, where the rapid market success of indigenous art fuelled its commodification by the cultural and tourist sectors.17

While contemporary Maori art has not achieved the international exposure and popularity accorded to Australian indigenous painting, Peter Robinson is cognizant of ethnicity being used for commodity status in his own culture, and his work rehearses such manoeuvres: 'My work deals with exploring Maori culture in a personal level, but it also questions that thing of careerism and the use of a 'flavour of the month' topic in a skeptical way, like biculturalism as a personal vehicle of careerism.'18 Robinson's The Great Plane Race (1998) has been interpreted as playing into an expectation of identity politics in art for a German audience.19

The Strategic Plan series of works of 1998 transmit Robinson's advice, apparently drawn from experience, to artists desirous of success in foreign art centres. His fantastical, ironic plan to achieve 'world domination' trades on the continued attraction of exoticness and authenticity in an unfamiliar culture. Naive sounding, his suggestions are delivered with a knowing futility, with the pathos of the powerless: 'Present the 'familier' and the exotic simultaneously. This will comfort the natives in recognising what they know while arousing their curiosity.' 'Use foreign language no matter how banal – this adds exoticism, and snob value. 'Kiss ass and grease as many palms as possible.' 'Attempt to speak the native tongue(s) of the country you're in. The locals find this very flattering.' 'Be seen in trendy bars and cafes with the right people and shower often.' 'Shake hands firmly and smile no matter how much you hate the bastard.'

Robinson and Bennett have more recently adopted new tactics in their work, that whether intentional or not, avoid what may have become cliched readings of Maoriness or Aboriginality. Robinson has shifted from the slick surfaces, tricolours and abstract forms of Divine Comedy to the messiness and gritty content of sculptural and felt works like Fag Time and MM (2003). His revitalised interest in sculpture seems to gesture toward the ridiculous and scatological nature of existence, regardless of ethnicity (but check for a revamped Io and precedents for the single eye and other forms in the

felt collages).

Robinson's recent works suggest their heritage lies firmly aligned in sensibility with a lineage of work by international artists: Philip Guston, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy amongst others. Robinson has been admitted to the 'Bad Boy' Hall of Fame according to Tobias Berger's essay in this catalogue. With their attention to the visceral and dysfunctional underbelly of life (right wing hoods, crazed leaders, psychotic teachers and other grotesqueries), the work of these artists offer both a humorous and disturbing character. A similar demeanour is evident in the dysfunctional and psychosexual nature of Robinson's works—in Fag Time Mr Potato Head meets Maori belief meets Guston's smoking artist. In the blunt roughness and absurd humour of Fag Time, MM and the drawings lies a frightening sincerity, as the works undertake the process of the stripping back and exposing of the unconscious or irreality of society.

It will be interesting to watch where Robinson's own creative strategy, based on a dialectical reaction or recoil against his previous work, will take his art. Robinson could be said to deliberately 'impersonate a stumblebum' in his approach, the term used by Hilton Kramer to describe Philip Guston when his work moved from the 'purity' of modernist lyrical abstraction to his figurative paintings in 1968. As Guston knew, painting continued only because it is amorphous enough to embrace impurities.20 If 'M' is the 'mother of all theories' in its attempt to unite all theories in the universe,21 then the felt image MM (2003) is Robinson's way, once again, of espousing that every hypothesis holds its negation within itself.

Gordon Bennett has at times adopted a pseudonym to counter and critique the constriction of his own individuality within art's institutional politics. Withdrawal and concealment, and an absence that is close to invisibility, are qualities evoked in differing ways in many of Bennett's recent images.

The Interior paintings by John Citizen, such as Interior (Chair and Vase) (2003) present innocuously familiar scenes. After the style of images promoting fashionable interior design, they privilege style over content, sensual desire over concept and point to the value in which aesthetics are held. The interiors are shockingly empty, black holes of meaning.

Bennett's Camouflage #1 (2003) comes from a body of work in which the portrait of Sadam Hussein and an anonymous gas masked head appear, treated in variations of camouflage patterning reminiscent of images by Andy Warhol. Set against a background design derived from the inside papers of the Koran, and painted during the year the Coalition forces 'of the Willing' staged the 'War against Iraq', the Camouflage paintings resonate deeply. A sort of facelessness metaphorically can suggest the denial of the existence, rights and histories of others, whether the people of Aboriginal Australia or elsewhere. The Iraq military action also covered up issues that many would like to ignore: social and economic politics at home, the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction, the situation of detained immigrants for a few. Faceless also is the artist who is defined by others.

Uncommon sense

'Truth is a quality of faith, faith is belief, so belief is truth.'—Gordon Bennett Penance 1995.

Powerful visual communicators, Bennett's and Robinson's 'grotesqueries' (bizarre and violent, sometimes humourous and mirroring contemporary sensibilities) encourage a sense of doubt, and suspicion at art that claims to be definitive. Inherent in their subjects and strategies of address is acknowledgement of the conglomeration of systems or ways of thinking and insertion of subjectivities from outside the centre. While Robinson adds a dose of burlesque in comparison to Bennett's witnessing of existence, their art acts as a mirror: responsive to the uses and abuses of power, its terrorism, and the failure of authority, logic and communication and offers no escape.

Political in their reminders of racism and essentialism, should we expect Robinson's and Bennett's work to generate material change? Is there any link between the nature and reception of indigenous art and the relative difficulty of visual art to be a polemical force?

'I am trying to paint the one painting that will change the world, before which even the most narrow minded and rabid racist will fall to their knees in profound awareness and spiritual openness, thus recognising their own stupidity, at once transcending it to become ... Of course this is in itself stupid and I am not a fool, but I think to myself, what have I got to lose by trying?'22

Robinson and Bennett have employed a politics of visual deconstruction and riposte partly in the hope for a more democratic politics. Their work is also an inextricable dialogue between human identity and the value and capacity of art. This is possible not because they speak from privileged positions in culture but just the opposite, because both Robinson and Bennett address the everyday, from their positions as artists: 'Making art by taking what is close at hand. Thinking about the biggest philosophical abstractions from the position of our most intimate experiences. Seeing change as being part of our choices and responses to the inventory of demands and obligations in everyday life. From this perspective, where the everyday and the dominant structures are perceived as interconnected, we can also see that art, theory and politics are in a constant dialogue. One cannot proceed without the other.'23

In Bennett's recent return to abstraction in stripe paintings such as Number Seven (2003), there is a deeper, subterranean presence at work, powerful qualities that can no longer be analysed by description or experience. Similarly, Robinson's practice troubles and extends the power of contemporary art. Like Guston, the art of both Robinson and Bennett changes as it adjusts for new impurities, continually open or aspiring to a third reality, which will supersede the past and present, self and other.

A political consciousness is foregrounded in the artists' interests in exposing and testing the construction of culture, in consciously staying home to take a local perspective on humanity, which also has a wider resonance. Robinson and Bennett recognise the romance in the hope for art's ability to alter attitudes toward a more open concept of culture. They sceptically adopt or resist western worldviews as useful in de-legitimising neocolonial power or political correctness. Robinson and Bennett confront and disassemble dysfunctional reality, whether in art or life because they know there are no guaranteed ways of imagining how we might live otherwise, or of any other project that would justify being an artist.

When the hooded protagonists resembling Klu Klux Klansmen first appeared in paintings by Philip Guston (and can now make appearances in work by both Robinson and Bennett), Willem de Kooning asked Guston what was the real subject of such paintings? Without hesitation both de Kooning and Guston exclaimed 'Freedom'. 'That's the only possession the artist has—freedom to do whatever you can imagine.'24

1. Tony Magnusson 'Gordon Bennett: Just An/Other Black Artist?' Art Monthly Australia 146 December 2001-February 2002, p31.
2. The Aboriginal flag was designed by Aboriginal artist Harold Thomas in 1971. It was nationally adopted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders after being flown at the Tent Embassy at Parliament House, Canberra, in 1972 and recognised as 'Flag of Australia' in the Flags Act 1953 in 1995. It has subsequently been enhanced with other political or geographical symbols in order to represent specific indigenous groups.
3. Felicity Milburn Sky Writers and Earth Movers McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, 1998, np.
4. 'Gordon Bennett' (artist's statement) Strangers in Paradise: Contemporary Australian Art to Korea Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992, p22.
5. ibid.
6. Gordon Bennett discussing his Basquiat series, quoted in Tony Magnusson, op cit., p32.
7. Belinda Jones 'Unpacking Peter Robinson' http://www.creativenz.govt.nz/venice-2001/artists/robinson/robinson-story.html, 5 January 2004
8. Gordon Bennett 'Notes to Basquiat' Gordon Bennett Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 1999, np.
9. Divine Comedy, with Jacqueline Fraser's A demure portrait of the artist strip searched << with 11 details of bi-polar disorder>> was Bi-polar, New Zealand's inaugural representation at the Venice Biennale. 49th Venice Biennale, New Zealand Pavilion, Museo di Sant'Apollonia, Venice, Italy, 2001. Robinson's title acknowledges Dante Aligheri's poetic trilogy of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise.
10. Gregory Burke Divine Comedy: Peter Robinson Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2001, pp9-10.
11. 'Robinson World is centrally concerned with the dislocation of thinking. What happens when a mode of analysis, fashioned in a particular context, is sent into space? Utilising the tricks of translation, contrast and recontextualisation, Robinson toys with topics ranging from the failure of critical models, to the distortion of intellectual programs and the awkwardness of projection. His pet topic, 'big picture' thinking, is displayed as an intimate and haphazard attempt at making sense of the world. Like the work of an amateur magician, Robinson's method is not seamless. The recklessness of his parallel world reveals an attraction to chaos.' Anna Miles, 'Au Contraire' Bi-polar Creative New Zealand, Wellington, 2001, p56, pp57-8.
12. Gordon Bennett interviewed in Bob Lingard 'A Kind of History Painting' Tension 17 August 1989, p41. Robinson's comment noted in conversation with the artist, 7 March 2004.
13. Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi '(Re)membering, (Dis)membering "Aboriginality" and the Art of Gordon Bennett Third Text 26 Spring 1994, p88.
14. Gordon Bennett, 'Notes to Basquiat' op cit., np.
15. Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi, op cit., pp82-3.

16. Ian McLean ‘Camouflage’ Gordon Bennett: Figure/Ground (Zero) Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2003, np.
17. Writing about painting from non-urban centres, Rex Butler has identified the phenomena of Aboriginal art as a European ‘invention’, existing only through the desire for it by a white audience. Rex Butler, ‘’Bright Shadows’: Art, Aboriginality, and Aura’ South Atlantic Quarterly Vol. 101, No. 3, Summer 2002, p501.
18. Robinson quoted in ‘Megan Tamati-Quennell In Conversation with Peter Robinson’ Planet 14 1994, p60; in Korurangi: New Maori Art Auckland Art Gallery, 1996, p. 32.
19. Robert Leonard ‘Peter Robinson’s Strategic Plan’ Art Asia Pacific 16 1997, p73.
20. Ronald Jones ‘Philip Guston’s Poem-Pictures’ Frieze 25 November–December 1995, p58.
21. Gregory Burke ‘Bi-polar’ Bi-polar op cit., p15.
22. Gordon Bennett ‘Aesthetics and Iconography: An Artist’s Approach’ Aratjara: Art of the First Australians Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalenm, Dusseldorf, 1993, p91; quoted in Naomi Cass ‘Home Is Where the Heart Is’ The Wandering Jew: Myth And Metaphor Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne 1995, p18.
23. Nikos Paperstergiadis ‘”Everything that Surrounds”: Theories of the Everyday, Art and Politics’ Third Text 57 Winter 2001-2, p86.
24. Dore Ashton A Critical Study of Philip Guston University of California Press, Oxford, 1976, p186.