



Therese Ritchie, *Simon says*, 2011, 12 colour inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308gsm, 100% cotton, 39.5 x 137.5cm (image), 51 x 147cm (paper); image courtesy the artist

'X' marks the space: roads cross, Flinders University Art Museum

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I go to great lengths to tell my inquirers that there is, in fact, no such thing as Aboriginal blood as such – I am in the B* blood group – and knowledge doesn't come from genetics, but from learned experience.

(Anita Heiss, 2012¹)

roads cross, contemporary directions in Australian art, currently showing at Flinders University Art Museum (FUAM), Adelaide (until 26 August), is a minefield of an exhibition – brimming with riches material and aesthetic, and charged with high-octane conceptual and political import. The exhibition, like its predecessor at FUAM, *From Appreciation to Appropriation: Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art* (2000, curated by Dr Christine Nicholls), marks an important and timely juncture in the debate around cross-cultural practice between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists in Australia. Notably, Margaret Preston (1875-1965) loomed large in Nicholls's 2000 show, as she does again this time round, not in *roads cross*, but as part of *documenta (15)*, in Kassel, Germany (until 16 September), along with paintings from Gordon Bennett's *Home Décor* series which, in true postmodern step, re-appropriates Preston's appropriations of Aboriginal art.

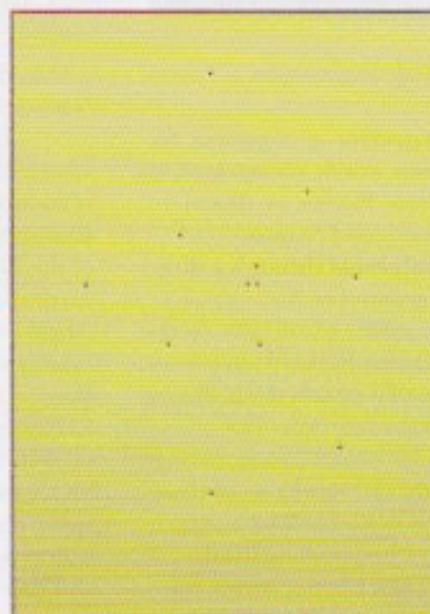
roads cross, too, is anchored by the work of a deceased artist, Rover Thomas (Joolama) (c. 1926-1998), who is represented by two etchings, and in the exhibition title's allusion to the title of one of these prints, *Crossroads*.² Both works form an actual and symbolic entrée into the exhibition, their central 'X' motif marking a spot, or space, of fertile contact, a meeting point between cultures. As etchings, produced in collaboration with printmaker Leon Stainer (at Northern Editions Printmaking Workshop, Charles Darwin University, Darwin), they further embody this conceptual common ground at the heart of this exhibition. Alongside Thomas's work is a Thomas/Kimberley tribute painting, *Rainstorm over Kununurra* (2003), and related sketch by Franck Gohier, Northern Editions' co-founder who also collaborated with Thomas and was part of a team that travelled with Thomas in 1995 back to his place of birth along the Canning Stock Route, in the Great Sandy Desert. So far,

so good, yet in anchoring the show with the work of Thomas, questions inevitably surface about the intent and marketability underlying such collaborations. Thomas's later output was, of course, partly embroidered in scandal, with the spectre of forgery and dubious provenance still hanging over his name – not through any criminality on his part but on the part of others desperate for a slice of his earning power. Gohier's tribute evokes Thomas's famous painting, *All that big rain coming from topside* (1991), which in 2001 set the record for Aboriginal art in auction (fetching \$780,000).

I'm not at all questioning Gohier's intentions; of the show's sixteen non-Aboriginal artists, his involvement with Aboriginal art and artists is merely an extension of growing up and living in Darwin, a town in which the 'roads cross' cultural metaphor is more about lived and learned experience than a studied artistic approach. But issues of intention, particularly from the non-Aboriginal side, are unavoidable with this exhibition, playing as it does into a highly politicised and contentious landscape that is constantly shifting. Being mindful of these shifts is no easy task, as the three curators for *roads cross* (Fiona Salmon, Vivonne Thwaites and Anita Angel) will no doubt attest. For example, the exhibition's year-long gestation occurred around the same time as the formulation of the national Indigenous Art Code, and with art centres such as Tjala Arts (Amata) also engaged in determining their own code of conduct for dealing with 'outsider' artists.

The resulting exhibition is not, however, a politically correct dilution. While the curators were obviously careful in their choice of artists, and in framing an essentially positive view of their subject, the exhibition (both through the work on show, and its formidable seventy-six page catalogue) inherently attempts to add to, rather than close, debate. And, lest it needs reiterating, it is, above all, an exhibition of art, not an addendum for any particular dogmatic or ideological position.

While *From Appreciation to Appropriation* is the institutional precursor for *roads cross* – both exhibitions affirming FUAM's collecting and related research



strengths, the more immediate catalyst was a show curated by Adelaide-based Vivonne Erwaite in 2010, *Responses to working on Indigenous lands*, which included two artists also represented in *roads cross*: Alison Alder and Gus Clatterbuck. It is, in fact, the very choice of artists, and the particular examples of their work, that make this such a worthy exhibition. Not only have the curators gone for a diverse mix of two- and three-dimensional media. In surveying the past fifteen years of practice (since Thomas's 1996-97 editioned prints), they have sought to bring 'new faces' into the fold, as a reflection of the current (and shifting) landscape and the need to present this 'space' with relative freshness and nuance. More established artists such as Nalda Searles, Hossein Valamanesh, or Therese Ritchie may not be so 'new' to the exhibition's underlying premise or its audience, but they are certainly part of its 'new' context overall which includes some lesser-known names, such as Una Rey, Quentin Sprague, Tobias Richardson, and Jonathan Kimberley. Sprague's work, two rather formalist-minimalist paintings and a quirky, molecular-looking sculpture, initially seems an odd choice but in light of his conceptual connections with the work of Tiwi artist Timothy Cook, in particular (with whom Sprague worked

1/ Franck Gohier, *Rainstorm over Kukuruma*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on board, 80 x 61cm; Collection: Flinders University Art Museum; image courtesy the artist and Flinders University

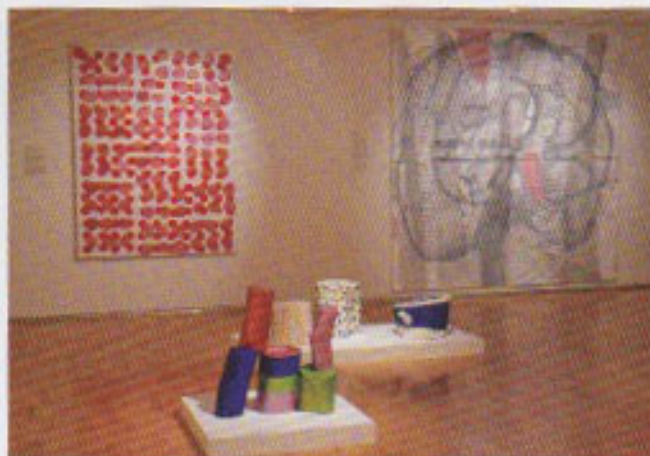
2/ Tobias Richardson, *Marinella House*, 2000, acrylic and natural pigment on board, 88 x 71cm; gift of the artist, Flinders University Art Collection; image courtesy the artist and Flinders University

3/ Quentin Sprague, *Crossing open ground*, 2010-11, synthetic polymer paint on board, 102.5 x 107cm; image courtesy the artist

while based at Jilamara Arts & Crafts on Melville Island), both artists actually come off looking (or being perceived) better.

The exhibition's varying nuances of engagement range from the work of artists such as Angela Brennan and Lauren

Berkowitz whose actual involvement with Aboriginal artists is quite limited but who nonetheless draw on Aboriginal art for inspiration (broadly, and through the work of particular artists) as they do with other aesthetic and conceptual sources. Valamanesh, too, would seem to be in this camp; he was part of an artistic group touring Western Desert Aboriginal communities in the early '70s soon after arriving in Australia as an immigrant from Iran. Although this was a one-off experience, it came at an important time of his life and artistic practice: "it opened my eyes and influenced my decision to stay here permanently".⁵ Nalda Searles, by contrast, has maintained a twenty-year collaborative relationship with senior Ngaanyatjarra artist Dr Pantjiti Mary McLean, amidst other cross-cultural projects and networks. This fact does lend more credence and understanding to her *Learning*



Ngaanyatjarra series of works which incorporate Ngaanyatjarra words.

The length or type of engagement is, of course, no real indicator of aesthetic or artistic worth, except perhaps in the case of artists such as Therese Ritchie or Alison Alder whose work, by its very politicised nature, presupposes a position of being informed through a direct and sustained involvement with grassroots Aboriginal people and activism. Perhaps the most radical take on the exhibition's theme is evident in Tobias Richardson's work, particularly his series of mixed-media panels made during his time as a teacher at Utopia in the late '90s. The installation of these and subsequent works (made during his time working/living at Maningrida) marks an aesthetic high-point in the exhibition, but it is Richardson's actual incorporation of discarded louvres (supporting local graffiti and desert iconography) from Utopia within his own artworks that pushes the 'appropriation' debate into new terrain. Clearly, through his bricolage, Richardson has physically appropriated this work which, though chanced upon as building refuse rather than 'art', makes his final work appear almost like a 'Utopia louvres' riposte to the famous Yuendumu Doors.

Though a very good-looking exhibition, *roads cross* is slightly impaired by the limitations of FUAM's single-room gallery, a space which is well-located within Adelaide's North Terrace cultural precinct but not purpose-built for displaying art. In addition to the show's sixteen non-Aboriginal artists are five Aboriginal artists represented by collaborative works. Significantly, with the exception of Thomas's prints, these seemed to be the most problematic, or aesthetically weakest works in the show. Pairing Robin Best's refined porcelain vessels with the bold *walka* designs by Ernabella's Nyukana Baker might seem like a good idea but the residual artistic convergence appears quite cosmetic, not quite the 'deep grammar' of creolisation which Marcia Langton champions in her essay for the exhibition's catalogue. The large-scale collaborative painting by Jonathan Kimberley and Palawa (Tasmanian) artist pura-lia meenamatta (Jim Everett) seems similarly overwrought although appreciably showing at least one cultural reference point



1/ *roads cross*, installation view, Flinders University Art Museum, 2012; with (background and right) works by Angela Brennan, and (right) Jonathan Kimberley and pura-lia meenamatta (Jim Everett), *Meenamatta walantakalay – beyond the colonial/ colonial: meenamatta map of umbrookpa*, 2006; image courtesy the artists and Flinders University Art Museum

2/ Pamela Lofts, *Mightie somewhere (Big Aoki)*, from the *Threshold* series, 2007; Collection: Charles Darwin University Art Collection; Purchased through the Charles Darwin University Foundation, 2009; see related article by Kieren Finnane, *AMA* 4 221, July 2002

within the exhibition not so bound up with the fate and (artistic) fortunes of 'remote' Aboriginal Australia.

Jointly produced by Flinders University and Charles Darwin University, the cultural gaze in *roads cross* is understandably more fixed on Aboriginal art and artists emanating from the Top End and Central/Western deserts of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. This becomes a kind of clarion call in Anita Angel's rather long but impassioned and scholarly catalogue essay which pulls no punches in critiquing the eastern seaboard bias of similarly themed precedents such as Felicity Fenner's *Talking About Abstraction* exhibition (2004), or the postmodern inflected arguments of fellow catalogue essayist Ian McLean. Cross-cultural politics aside, *roads cross* also comes at a time when university art history programs and related art collection curatorship and research are under threat, as recently evidenced with the proposed withdrawal of art history studies at Melbourne's La Trobe University, and the proposed axing of Edith Cowan University's art collection curator position. *roads cross* unequivocally affirms the vitality and focus of our university-based galleries. The exhibition also serves as a fitting tribute to participating artist Pamela Lofts (1949-2012) who passed away soon after the exhibition opened.

1. Anita Heiss, *Am I Black Enough For You?*, Bantam, 2012, p. 133.
2. Notably, Thomas's 1994 retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia was also titled *Roads Cross: Paintings of Rover Thomas*.
3. Hossein Valamanesh in conversation with Ian North, in Mary Knights and Ian North, *Hossein Valamanesh: Out of nothingness*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2011, p. 12; quoted in Stephanie Radok (ed.), *roads cross, contemporary directions in Australian art*, exhibition catalogue, Flinders University, Adelaide, 2012, p. 70.

roads cross, contemporary directions in Australian art, curated by Fiona Salmon, Vivonne Thwaites and Anita Angel, is showing at Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, 29 June to 26 August 2012. The exhibition will also show at Charles Darwin University Art Gallery, Darwin, 22 November 2012 to 23 February 2013. www.flinders.edu.au/museum/