

### Gordon Bennett's Home Decor: the joker in the pack

The repeal of *terra nullius* in the Mabo case may have exposed the mythology which secured the British occupation and exploitation of Australia, but it did not foreclose the myth itself. The colonial ideologies that created a Manichean society based on racist lines are as strong as ever. This, anyway, is the disconcerting message of Gordon Bennett's art, and probably why viewers find his art 'in your face', as I recently overheard one teacher saying to students in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

I take it that the expression 'in your face' signifies something visceral and physical, even rude, loud and aggressive, but most of all, confronting and inescapable. In the visual arts it is usually associated with transgressive subject matter and non-traditional art forms, such as performance art, installation, photography. *Performance with object for the expiation of guilt* (1996), a recent video by Bennett, might be considered all of the above. In an exercise of self-flagellation, a hooded Bennett paces around whipping and yelling racist obscenities at a box made to the dimensions of his own body. However, in general, the format and style of Bennett's art is neither confronting, transgressive nor loud. Rather, his art mainly consists of well composed paintings on canvas whose images quote from social studies text books and various examples of twentieth century art, many of which are abstract paintings. Equally, his style is not aggressive, and recalls the recently deceased Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, whose decorative appropriations of comic books and famous paintings graciously adorn many corporate spaces.

Bennett, however, is not a Pop artist, but a postmodernist working in a deconstructive vein. He re-figures various modernist and colonialist images (usually drawn from paintings by well known artists) in order to make ironic readings of their aesthetic (ie ideological) regimes. Because his readings are multiple rather than singular, he forces the viewer's hand by demanding from s/he a further interpretation. That is, Bennett's simultaneous readings of various paintings mobilise a field of ambiguity which only the viewer can resolve, or at least negotiate and navigate. This is why I can only conclude that viewers make themselves anxious before Bennett's work. They are troubled by the implied meta-text of Bennett's paintings, by the gaps between the re-arrangements and constellations of signs which they fill with their own expectations: Gordon Bennett, angry young Aboriginal artist appealing to the guilt of the colonisers.

Bennett's art might be troubling, but the anxiety it induces is caused by the viewers own anxieties and expectations, and not by being 'in your face'. His recently completed series, which goes under the generic title of *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen)*, is therefore timely. More than any other of his works, it challenges the expectations which have so rapidly type cast Bennett as the scapegoat for and conscience of Australia's racist foundations. In a retro art deco style, Bennett's new series recalls the mid-twentieth century fashion for combining nationalist themes with abstract patterning inaugurated by Margaret Preston. Preston's art remains amongst the most popular of Australian paintings produced this century. Bennett's aim, however, is not to just disrupt his typecasting, but to keep the attention on what has always been his target - the viewer's own consciousness and sense of place in Australia's racial politics. Thus he quotes Preston's art because it is populist and 'nice', and because its nationalism is staged by her admiration for Aboriginal art. Preston worked in a decorative modernist primitivist style which, in an idealist fashion, incorporated Aboriginality into a Western scheme. Her aesthetic, assimilationist and nationalist, and closely aligned to the Jindyworobak movement, aimed at a rare and unprecedented

rapprochement between Aboriginal and Western cultures. Preston's home decor has, like Bennett's, a message.

If the doubled text of Preston's art suits Bennett's purpose, his text is re-doubled and re-doubled again, until his work is like an echo chamber. While the rapprochement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia was conceived by Preston on a stereotypical modernist stage, it could cut both ways, as in her ironical 1950s series of stencils based on biblical themes which depict an Aboriginal Adam and Eve and an antipodean Paradise. Indeed, Bennett mainly quotes from such unusually ironical and allegorical (and, Humphrey McQueen points out, apocalyptic<sup>1</sup>) late works by Preston, rather than from her more populist 'nice' paintings of native flowers. Further, Bennett's quotations of Preston's work are not particularly obvious. They are not straight appropriations, but consist of complex cross-references, as is evidence in a brief inventory of one painting from the series, *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Black Swan of Trespass* (1996). Here Bennett transposes the black Adam from Preston's *The Expulsion* (1952) against a complex medley of signs. Adam is shown appealing to the God who has forsaken him, His sign, the white cross on which Adam is both transfixed and escaping from. The white cross, however, is not a singular sign. It obliquely quotes the white sword wielded by the angel in Preston's *The Expulsion*, and is, more directly, the Christian sign of Christ's sacrifice for our sins. For the art initiate, however, the white cross recalls the iconic images of the Russian revolutionary modernist painter, Kasimir Malevich. God, or at least the Holy Spirit, is also signified by the black swan (another quote from Preston) sweeping above Adam - or is this an Aboriginal Spirit, a black totem or dreaming figure? In the upper left corner is another Malevich square, or is it the whipped box from *Performance with object for the expiation of guilt*, or both simultaneously? In the bottom half of the painting are the signage of traditional Aboriginal paintings and stories, some of which (such as the foot outlines) Preston also used. Across the picture is a lattice of Piet Mondrian's grids, like the gates of Paradise in Preston's *The Expulsion* which are firmly closed behind Adam and Eve. The name of Bennett's painting, *Black Swan of Trespass*, reiterates the themes of expulsion and guilt, but also refers to the famous Australian anti-modernist hoax of 1944 instigated by James McAuley and Harold Stewart, the fictitious Ern Malley poems. Ern Malley's 'Dürer: Innsbruck, 1495' concludes: 'I am still the black swan of trespass on alien waters.' Bennett's title also refers to Humphrey McQueen's book *The Black Swan of Trespass* (1979), which claimed that the Aboriginalist Preston was Australia's preeminent modernist between the wars.

Can, then, any consistent meaning be garnered by the viewer from such a complex and layered signage? How are we to explain this work? Is Bennett parodying Preston, or does he participate in and reproduce her framing of Aboriginality within modernism? Put in this either/or way, the question limits the meaning of his work, for it is likely that he is doing both and more. This something more is, as in Pop art, often in the comic mode. So to experience Bennett's paintings as being 'in your face' is to lack a sense of humour - but maybe it is understandable that most Australians find the history and contemporary practice of racism a humourless subject, and one so dark that it can only be tackled with the most radical and subversive tactics. Besides, Bennett has no control over the meta-interpretations he invites; and his humour is often dark and, in particular, grotesque. If the *Home Decor* series generally foregoes darker moments for a more whimsical mood, the comic remains an important if not essential ingredient of the grotesque.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass*, Alternative Publishing Company, Sydney, p. 161-162.

Putting aside the conundrums of Bennett's art, some general points can be made. The *Home Decor* series does not make a radical departure, in style or content, from the flat monumental decorative paintings Bennett is renowned for. For the previous ten years he has presented wry comments on the contemporary manufacture of identity by combining tangential concerns of self-portraiture with a wider social history that implicates himself in the history of Australia. By this I mean that his self-portraiture has always been an inquiry into the social psychology and semiotic mechanisms of identity, rather than the usual ego-texts of the genre. The question who am I is not answered by an inner psychic journey, but by the study of a history of place and ideology which, ironically, dissolves the generally accepted boundaries of identity and individuality. For example, if John Citizen is the euphemism Bennett has recently given himself, it casts him as everyman. This, after all, is what John Citizen literally means: it does not signify a real individual, but is first of all a sign, and a sign of modern democratic republican man. Like most good comics, Bennett means to implicate himself as well as his audience.

Bennett, then, does not make self-portraits in order to better know his own ego, but to use himself as the whipping boy for a social critique. It is a way of staging the sin and transgressions of the world, not in order to absolve them, but to make visible the guilt of texts, to map their secret subliminal sources. Bennett usually names these sources in a bracketed sub-title that follows the main title, as if they are the unconscious of the painting. In the *Home Decor* series the brackets generally contain the rather baffling equation, Preston + De Stijl = Citizen. And indeed, the sources of the *Home Decor* series mainly consist of elements derived from the art of Preston and Mondrian, the leading painter and theorist of the De Stijl movement. Their combination, however, is not as baffling as it might first seem. In mid-twentieth century Australia, the modernisms of De Stijl abstraction and Preston's Aboriginalism produced a popular modern hybrid Australiana for the home decor of its citizens. The aphoristic equation Preston + De Stijl = Citizen aptly describes this period of Australian culture - a period which had its hey day in the 1950s, when Bennett was born. Hence the nostalgia is also personal. These works are a type of self-portraiture. Not only is John Citizen the pseudonym he has given himself, but Bennett's own hybrid figurative/abstract style is like the combining of Preston's and Mondrian's art. If Bennett is meaning to make a satire, which he probably is on one level at least, the joke is also on him.

While Bennett's art gives up a narrative meaning easily, he always layers several meanings, many of which are not immediately forthcoming. You can be sure of one thing when viewing his paintings: what seems obvious will be undone, and that the punchline will be elsewhere. To read his signage in simple didactic terms is as mistaken as reading Mondrian's reductive abstractions as elegant patterns - as home decor. While Bennett's iconography, graphically and clearly displayed in the mould of Pop art, is there to be read like a comic, he is also a comic who not only undoes his own performance, but generates a complex series of counter discourses that threaten to permanently destabilise any singular meaning. For example, on the one hand, Bennett seems more interested in the mid-twentieth century commercial exploitation of Mondrian's paintings as home decor - designs for carpet, linoleum, wallpaper and fabric -, than in his esoteric theosophical cosmology of purity and balance. Yet, on the other hand, Mondrian's cosmology is not unrelated to Bennett's own aspirations. Mondrian's ideal of creating an accord between opposites was never expressed in terms of the accord Preston sought between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian cultures, but Bennett recognises a connection between the two artists and his own aspirations for reconciliation. Perhaps this is one reason why, in his most recent exhibition at Bellas Gallery in Brisbane

(shown in October 1997), the generic title is reduced to *Home Decor (Algebra)* - algebra meaning both an abstract calculus of symbols, and the surgical treatment of fractures, its Arab derivation meaning 'reunion of broken parts' (OED).

If there seems an unbridgeable gulf between Mondrian's high art modernism and the modernist kitsch it spawned, Bennett traces the echoes resounding in this gulf. And the echoes sound like a kookaburra. Who would not laugh and carry on laughing at an identity made from the unlikely combining of Mondrian's theosophical internationalism with Preston's nationalist Aboriginalism? What sort of republic is this? Yet Bennett has used Mondrian's iconic structure of dynamic balances made from opposites as the basis for his fugue of figurative and abstract elements, high art and kitsch, European and non-European signs - surely the sorts of bizarre and unlikely reconciliations which can be the only basis of a virtuous Australian republic.

-----

Bennett's jokes are not designed to let us off the hook. If, as I have suggested, his paintings are decorative, they are decorations with bite. They rub our faces in our uncertainties and fears, refusing us the luxury of a silent unconscious and the space to get on with our happy lives. No wonder his work seems 'in your face', even when it poses as home decor. Maybe it is even more in your face as home decor. And it is resolutely home decor because, as I suggested previously, the ability of Bennett's work to trouble an audience reflects the power of signs not reality, of art not its transgression. This is the most important clue in understanding Bennett's art, and in particular, the *Home Decor* series. He doesn't bring the reality of racism into the living room, but art; and that is why it is decor. The equation Preston + De Stijl = Citizen only makes sense as a narrative of signs. If considered in any real or logical sense, it is absurd, unbelievable

Since his student days, Bennett has consciously presented his art as a very abstract theatre of signs, and, indeed, a theatre scripted from signs. His imagery is entirely drawn from other images, not reality. No matter how depressed and distracted Bennett might be by the facts of racism in Australia, he emphatically makes the point that he is first of all an artist, a dealer in signs which, by their nature, can not represent the full horror of racist practices. Bennett's concern, however, is not the inadequacy of signs or language to represent reality, but their power to stage ideologies (eg laws, art). Whatever the limits of signs, they powerfully present the ideologies which sustain the social meanings ascribed to reality. Signs articulate the unconscious of a culture, its abstract relations and structures, not its everyday utterances. Or as Saussure, the Swiss semiotician put it, signs are *langue* not *parole*.

The predominance of Mondrian derived grids in the *Home Decor* series is Bennett's clearest reminder yet that his paintings are first of all art. Here all anger at the political order, no matter how deeply and violently felt, is made polite, and politic. Hence his figurative paintings are oddly abstract - a point which Jean Baudrillard made about the so-called figurative art of Pop.<sup>2</sup> Bennett does not provide a window to the world, but plunges us into the abstract realm of signs. His figuration is never mimetic, but remains resolutely iconographic, signs in an algebra. This is underscored by his generic title, *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen)*, and even more emphatically, *Home Decor (Algebra)*. Being a

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, edited and translated by Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis, *Revenge of the Crystal*, Pluto Press, Leichardt, 1990, p. 80-87.

mathematical equation, abstract through and through, it has no immediate need for any empirical referent - though, as I will argue presently, Bennett does not leave his art purely in the realm of semiotic difference.

The very failure of signs to properly represent things and events is necessary to their ideological purpose, which must exceed or over-ride the limits of the everyday no matter how empirical these limits might be. For example, it was and is obvious to the colonisers that an indigenous people occupied Australia. Their presence is depicted in paintings and other images from the time of the first explorers and colonists to the present day. Two hundred years of documents describe Aboriginal cultures and manners, record Aboriginal dismay and protests at the invasion of their land, and reflect on the melancholy of a dispossessed people. Today Aboriginal art is celebrated in the most prestigious Australian art collections, and is sold in large quantities as home and business decor. Now Aboriginal culture is even the main frame for the way Australia is officially presented to the world and, arguably, is an important ingredient in the current re-conceptualising of Australian identity and nationhood. Yet, despite all this, the old metaphors and ideologies continue. *Terra nullius* might be dead as a legal concept, but it lives on as the unconscious of the nation. How else do we explain the government's reaction to the Wik decision? Or the way in which 'we' look at 'them', the indigenous Australians, as an other which, at best, must be accommodated, and at worst, made to disappear?

Bennett first learnt the lesson of signs when he discovered he was black when he was already white. Suddenly he was an excess, a hyper identity, a persona of multiple and competing signifiers that overdetermined his life. Bennett learnt that prior to his consciousness was the sign, as if his ego was a double or mirror-image without origin - what Baudrillard called a 'precession of simulacra'.<sup>3</sup> Maybe this is why such a resolutely abstract artist paints seemingly figurative paintings: he can not believe in what Mondrian liked to call the purity of abstraction. Mondrian may have confused his abstract orders with the hidden forces of nature and society, and believed they were blueprints for establishing 'the equivalence of nature and spirit, the individual and the universal' which could be realised 'not only in the plastic arts, but also in man and society',<sup>4</sup> but Bennett has no such dreams. He knows that he and we are already trapped in a forest of signs, in the hyper-reality of ideology and the after-life of myths which reside in history.

However signs do not come already encoded with meaning. Despite what I have said about the hegemony of signs and ideology, this hegemony is always compromised by the social contexts (histories) of semiology, and the real differences (eg the social affects of racism) they institute. That is, the actual meanings of signs is contingent on the specific historical and even empirical locations of their consumption. This location or context is the now of their stage: in this case the first years of the Howard regime, or perhaps more accurately from Bennett's Queensland perspective, the Hanson period. Australia's late run to republicanism without reconciliation is now like a re-run of 100 years ago, when Australians first began to formulate a consciousness of themselves as a nation founded on race. Bennett specifically alludes to this repeat of Federalism in his large painting, *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Then and Now* (1997).

---

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Baudrillard (1981), *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated Sheila Faria Glaser, Michigan University Press, 1994, p1.

<sup>4</sup> *Mondrian and De Stijl*, translated Charles Lynn Clark, Art Dada, 1987, p. 43.

If, as I am arguing, John Citizen is not just a euphemism for Gordon Bennett, but also for the new Australian republican citizen in the making, then Bennett proposes a genealogy: Preston + De Stijl. De Stijl might seem a strange ingredient of Australian identity. However Bennett leaves plenty of clues - an obvious one being that De Stijl is an analogy for the semiotic structure with which to articulate his meaning, just as republicanism is a universal/abstract form with which Australians propose to make a new identity. And this is how he appears to use the Mondrian derived grids: as a structure for articulating particular narratives - in this case, ones derived from Preston and others. De Stijl, after all, means the style; and as a movement it inherits that Western classical rationalist tradition which gave us the republican form of government. So, maybe if De Stijl explains the form or style, Preston explains the content. She is one of the first artists who springs to mind as the caretaker of Australian iconography. Prints of her works grace Australian homes as signs of Australian-ness. Home decor as emblems of nationhood. More importantly for Bennett's purposes, Preston is Australia's exemplary Aboriginalist and nationalist painter. In a series of articles in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and in her art over this period, she proposed that Australians should develop a new populist nationalism derived from Aboriginal not British cultural forms. And she was successful. Her designs were reproduced on the cover pages of populist women's magazines of the period, and are still influential in contemporary home decor.

Bennett's choice of Preston as a major player in his theatre suggests the nationalist and Aboriginalist content of his work, or at least that it is a significant aspect of his message. Other likely candidates whose art also grace Australian homes, such as Arthur Streeton or Hans Heysen, are too implicated in a white Australia and the pastoral ethic to qualify in the new Aboriginal friendly republic. On the other hand, Preston's paintings combine Aboriginal stylistic motifs within a modernist format, to propose a hybrid identity as a counter-discourse to the colonialist fear of cultural miscegenation (the White Australia policy). Arguably, her paintings are even precursors of Bennett's art. She is, then, an able prophet of the modern republican John Citizen who is proud of Australia's Aboriginal heritage, and wants to assimilate it into the concept of the new republic.

Or are there other explanations for Bennett's yoking together of Preston's Aboriginalist nationalism and Mondrian's internationalist modernism? Juan Davila, for example, ignored whatever ironical intentions Bennett may have had, and interpreted the *Home Decor* series as a vulgar binary discourse which protests the framing of Aboriginality by an internationalist modernism.<sup>5</sup> Referring to *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl) The Terrible Story* (1997), Davila wrote: 'The picture is adamant in saying' that above all, 'the aboriginal is in jail in the Western modernist grid.' Not unexpectedly given his own work, Davila is alert to the critical and satirical symbolism of Bennett's paintings. He wants a radical Bennett whose work forcefully criticises the racist regimes of coloniality in Australia. Thus Davila argues that Bennett 'presents the modernist European grid (Mondrian, De Stijl) "jailing" the representation of an aboriginal woman. She is behind the bars of the modernist equation' - the terrible story of neo-colonialism in Australia.

While completely different to the reading I have made, Davila's interpretation is, on the face of it, not unreasonable. For example, another painting in the series, the large *Home Decor*

---

<sup>5</sup> Davila's criticism is in a short paper published by the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane earlier this year called 'Friends of the People'. Except where referenced, all quotes by Davila are from this paper. The paper was originally written for and given at the launch in Melbourne earlier this year of a book edited by Nikos Papastergiadis: *Mixed Belongings and Unspecified Destinations*, UNIVA, London, 1996.

(*Preston + De Stijl = Citizen*) *Men with Weapons* (1997), makes a clear analogy between Mondrian's grid, and the grid of Western visuality reproduced in the inset image that Bennett has appropriated from his own earlier painting, *Men with Weapons (Corridor)* (1994). Both grids seem to serve the same iconographic purpose. Here De Stijl, a modernist European style, is the heir to Bennett's characteristic perspectival diagrams which, as icons of imperial Eurocentric ideologies, divided up colonised spaces such as Australia, imprisoning its indigenous inhabitants and cultures into a Western regime of power.

I will argue that while such an interpretation serves Davila's critical purpose well, he ignores other readings which are equally sustainable, and in doing so, undermines his main point. Davila's critical purpose is not to explain the meaning of Bennett's paintings, which he too quickly presumes, but to analyse their political and aesthetic affects. According to Davila, Bennett's formula is too Manichean; it 'presents the modernist grid only as a trap', as part of a binary structure or 'fixed structure of meaning'. This 'does not allow ambiguity or flux in understanding the contradictory reality of any language', and so disallows 'narratives of multiple meanings at a point when identity is a product of negotiations.' Further, and as a consequence of this, Bennett's symbolic representation of colonial oppression is a sham because its very binary formation endorses the 'transcendental paradigm' it seeks to oppose - namely that represented by Mondrian's modernist grid. Bennett might mean to show Aborigines oppressed by the iron cage of modernism, but it looks too much like home decor, like the two orders belong to the same colour scheme. For all Bennett's rage at racism, Davila suggests, his pictures hang easily in the museum. 'We just have a sum of differences translated into a market spectacle.' Bennett has become just another abstract painter, his protests at colonial violence failing to exceed the Eurocentrism of his voice and that 'monotonous and abstract certitude' of the State which dismisses 'the singularity of each difference.' Davila's criticism of Bennett repeats what he said of Imants Tillers' juxtaposition of Aboriginal designs with contemporary European paintings (in, for example, *The Nine Shots* (1985)): 'aboriginality is placed within the picture as resolved: namely reconciled with the European tradition, cleansed and abstracted in an idealised and marketable package, one that represents the collapse of differences.'<sup>6</sup>

Davila's criticism of Bennett's paintings is doubly interesting because his aesthetic and his intentions are very similar to those of Bennett, and because it echoes concerns he has for his own practice. Like Bennett, Davila works in a post-Pop manner whose comic/grotesque character is often experienced as being in your face and aggressive, when in fact he pictures multi-layered meanings derived from the ambiguities and historical contingencies of signs. Bennett might picture binaries in ways that Davila finds limiting and crude, but arguably, Bennett also floods them with irony and ambiguity - indeed, these binaries are the grist for his jokes. Yet, as Davila's discomfort suggests, there are real differences between the two artists - the most important, from Davila's point of view, being Bennett's promotion of Aboriginality from the centre, and not as a minority discourse.

Davila's notion of minority discourse derives from the cosmology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which divides the social order into 'majority' and 'minority' discourses'. Davila describes majority discourse as 'the dominance of the universal consensus'. In Bennett's art it might be called the iron cage of home decor. By Davila's logic, to even utter a word of this majority language condemns one. His solution, which he calls 'the "realist" approach', mobilises those moments of everyday life or material history that, however

---

<sup>6</sup> Juan Davila, 'Aboriginality: a Lugubrious Game', *Art & Text*, 23/24, 1987, p. 55, 56.

fleetingly, elude the structures of language and so the net of majority discourse. Deleuze and Guattari called it 'becoming-minoritarian', or becoming-woman, -black, -Jew, -animal etc.. These abrasive moments occur in minority discourses, when, rent from the 'standard measure' of majority identity, the subject is deterritorialized, decentred, left in-between.<sup>7</sup> 'Every time a minority fights the dominance of the universal consensus', writes Davila, 'some internal contradictions do appear that challenge dogma, even if they are temporary, partial or nearly imperceptible.' Indeed they have to, by Davila's Deleuzian definition, be temporary, partial and nearly imperceptible. Bennett's oppositional discourse, argues Davila, is a majority discourse because it transforms these irritable differences, transgressions and partialities of colonial practices into spectacles of difference. In short, says Davila, Bennett prefers the certainty rather than the 'uncertainty of difference.'

Arguably, the genius of Davila's art is to preserve the irony, in-betweenness and ambiguity of differences without losing sight of the binary oppositions which institute the majority law and its transgressions. Further, Davila is not unaware of the limits of his own praxis, limits which have been startling obvious for some time; namely that the centre delights in minority discourses. Today,' wrote Davila recently, when 'the mis-en-scene of identity is . . . a well paid job', and minority discourses "'appear" in the Western art circuit', the task is even more urgent. 'Since resistance and transgression are the replacements of taste, how can we', asks Davila, 'deflect this construct?' His answer:

we can insist on the impossibility of translation of our language, our places and histories. We can denounce hybridity as a privileged notion through which our cultures are being curated (silenced) by the centre. . . . We can insist on zones of silence against the current dictatorship of the masks of identity.<sup>8</sup>

Davila's tactic of silence is a type of anti-art designed to up the anti, to remain 'in your face' - and indeed it is a distinctly twentieth century form of shock radicalism practised from Duchamp to Beckett. But it is a tactic which Bennett explicitly rejects, along with Davila's call for the denunciation of hybridity and translation. Bennett proceeds in a more Derridean fashion by invoking multiple readings that deconstruct each other, a space in which there is nothing but translations and hybridity.

Paradoxically, given Davila's demand for 'identity' being 'a product of negotiations' which recognises the 'ambiguity or flux in understanding the contradictory reality of any language', his Deleuzian reading of Bennett's work misses its multiplicity of texts, and hence its ironies - even the obvious irony of Bennett's posing his oppositional (binary) discourse as home decor. It is not that Davila's interpretation is wrong, but that it is too simplistic and misunderstands, in a fundamental way, the aesthetic structures of Bennett's practice - namely that his art operates on several levels, each undoing the other. Bennett works with the binaries of majority discourse, but they are not the one-dimensional binary which Davila sees. For example, while I initially took the neat equation in the title of the series at face value because it does actually give up a meaning which is consistent and demonstrable, a closer reading throws up contradictions which make the equation unsustainable. First, the elements of his equation are incongruent: they can not be combined. Mondrian in Australia, and the marriage of Preston and Mondrian, whatever the context, is absurd. Mondrian's art

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 291-293.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Davila, 'Dear A&D Reader', *Art & Cultural Difference Hybrids and Cultures*, Art & Design Profile No 43, Academy Group Ltd, London, 1995, p. 17-19.



makes universal claims, shows no apparent interest in non-Western art forms and is manifestly about ideas not the natural world; whereas Preston is a nationalist with a passion for Aboriginal art and nature. Besides, Mondrian was such a purist that the very ideas of the hybrid equation proposed by Bennett is, in Mondrian's scheme, heretical.

This, of itself, is not inconsistent with Davila's reading - indeed it confirms it, for Davila sees the Preston and De Stijl elements as binary opposites which work as analogies of contesting Aboriginalist and Eurocentric forces in Australia. However the incongruence is not necessarily one of mutually exclusive differences, but of dependent binaries, of internal differences, deferrals and translations which paradoxically also establish an affinity between Preston and Mondrian, and in doing so, ironically re-confirm Bennett's equation. Not only was Preston a modernist whose primitivism derives from the modernist primitivism pioneered by Cubism, but Mondrian's art also derives from the same source: Cubism. More interestingly, Preston's and Mondrian's paintings were made in the same inter-war decades, a period which, importantly for the sort of history which Bennett pictures, is a time when black and colonised cultures made their first successful incursions into modernism, including into Mondrian's art. In paintings such as *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Life in the Rhythm Section* (1996), *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Dance the Boogiemans Blues* (1997) and *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Umbrellas* (1997), Bennett picks up on a connection rarely made: Mondrian was a jazz enthusiast. Like Preston, he was fascinated by black cultures.

As the layers of meaning in Bennett's paintings unfold, apparent differences take on uncanny similarities. Suddenly the incongruence between Preston and Mondrian intermingle. When this happens, that is, when the significations and contexts of the signs shift, the meaning of the work inverts. If, at first, the paintings seemed to picture a split between an oppressive abstract grid and a freer figurative narrative as described by Davila, now the grids play an integral part in the narrative. Indeed, far from being a prison, the bars do not hold in or imprison the Aboriginal figures, but are more like a playground through and over which the figures climb. In one reading, the Mondrian grids are bars which imprison Aboriginal inmates; in another reading, the colouration of the grid (red, yellow and a dark blue) echoes the colours of the Aboriginal flag, and hence is a sign of Aboriginality. There might be a Philip Guston Klu Klux Klan figure wielding a whip in the play ground, and looking remarkably like the hooded Bennett in *Performance with object for the expiation of guilt*, but the groovy umbrella men remain pretty cool. Suddenly the genealogy of Mondrian's art is not just in the classical rationalism generally associated with Western (majority) culture, but in the hybrid (minority) cultures of Afro-America. His grids are not the prison bars of a logocentric discourse, but the improvised bars of American jazz.

This complex interchange, Shakespearian in its ironies and twists, is most apparent in the sub-plots of Bennett's theatre. Mondrian is not alone, his cubist comrades also make appearances in sub-plots which suggest that the indigenous populations are not just victims, and that the supposed binary between coloniser and colonised is too simplistic a concept. In *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Men with Weapons*, Picasso plays the fool, or harlequin. From the mirror he looks in stares back a black face. In the same painting, which uses an earlier work by Bennett that depicts a confrontation between Aborigines and armed settlers, a black Malevich figure, in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, lines up on the side of the Aborigines, pointing his abstract gun back at the whites. Malevich makes another appearance in *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) The Cat* (1997) as yet another black person wearing an Aboriginal flag on his shirt - the flag here looking like a design

straight from Malevich's Suprematist studio. Is this a joke about that Cold War liberal rhetoric which saw Aboriginal activism as a communist plot?

If deeper meanings in Bennett's work undo more apparent meanings, it is a mistake to consider these deeper meanings deeper, more meaningful, or more truthful. They are not secret messages, subversive texts inserted in the home decor. Indeed, the more apparent messages are usually the more shocking - though as Davila and Bennett are keenly aware, it is shock which sells well these days, which has become home decor - like Ballard and Catherine, in *Crash* (1975), masturbating each other while watching images of violence on the TV. The secret of Bennett's art is not a hidden message, but the mystery of the simulacrum. There is no origin, only signs. Bennett's very concern with signs determines that his meanings are shifting and not locked down to the specific referents. If there is a message, this is it: the signs which have oppressed Aborigines are just signs, and as signs their meanings can shift, even invert.

For all his interest in signs, Davila does not share Bennett's faith in their potential for ambiguity. Davila wants to pin signs down to their historical referents, or at least show their historical rather than semiotic origins, and it is this worry about the presence of the real (or its absence in majority language) which overdetermines his reading of Bennett's work. Thus, the terrible story Davila reads in Bennett's *Home Decor (Preston + De Stijl) The Terrible Story* is that of colonial oppression, and not the title of Preston's painting from which Bennett quotes. Likewise, Davila sees Mondrian's grid as symbolising a jail which imprisons Aborigines, and misses that these 'Aborigines' are signs quoted from Preston's modernist paintings. The point is that all these readings are possible and necessary, and that it is the intersections and multiplicities of readings which allows the negotiations of identities that Davila calls for.

For all the similarity in their art, the differences between Bennett and Davila are profound. For Bennett, art, or signs, are the currency of identity; for Davila art and language, as the preserve of the majority, are the problem. Hence Davila's interpretation of Bennett's work is not due to an ill-considered reading, but to the underlying purpose of Davila's critique of Bennett: a partisan manifesto for his own practice. For all his espousal of ambiguity and uncertainty, Davila adheres to a Deleuzian universe of mutually exclusive opposites - majority/minority, molar/molecular etc., whereas Bennett lives in a Derridean world of infinite deferrals. For Davila, the minority status of Aborigines means that becoming-black is a subversive and potentially liberating state of being; for Bennett, whose fate is to be forever becoming-black, it is a discourse of coloniality and the predicate of being white.

There is, then, a certain fatalism in Bennett's art which Davila eschews, for Bennett seems to accept the dominant language and discourses as the necessary horizon of all contemporary thought and action. It is not that Bennett does not regard these discourses and power structures such as the museum and the law as oppressive, but that he takes their structures as the field of his own interrogations. If this is too fatalistic for Davila, Bennett's fatalism is not a resignation, for he sees within the symbolic field of dominant cultures a panoply of signs which can be inhabited, made to speak differently, re-worked, deconstructed. Even to remain silent is to speak, though it is a voice which admits its own emasculation. Better, as Adorno later realised after advocating silence as the only adequate response to the unrepresentability of Auschwitz, is to scream. At least Manning Clark recognised in the 'horrid howl' of 'aboriginal women' 'on first seeing the white man at Botany Bay in April 1770', 'a prophecy

of doom.<sup>9</sup> Bennett's tactic, however, is more like that of the equally famous early colonial Sydney resident, Bungaree, whose disguises and comic display in the early days of Sydney 'mocked the white men by mocking himself.'<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Bennett is not angry at racism, that he doesn't want to shock Australians, to continuously remind them where their wealth and power originate, but he understands that this is not enough: he has to at the same time show that it all rests on signs, that the emperor has no clothes.

Bennett then, does not remove himself from the real world in order to find refuge in the realm of signs. While recognising their priority in staging reality, he is acutely aware of their mutability and framing by the historical contingencies of everyday life. In this respect the subject of Bennett's art is the Kafkaesque metamorphosis or echoing between sign and reality, between *langue* and *parole*. This is why he can never be an abstract artist, or at least, not one like Mondrian. Is this why Bennett is fascinated by Malevich's late return to the figure after his descent into the absolute space of pure abstraction? In the *Home Decor* series, the Malevichian figures wearing the Aboriginal colours, lurking like jokers (the proverbial Shakespearian fool) metamorphosed from abstract patterns, seem to have found a means of redemption from the signs which previously consigned them to the flatlands of an abstract existence (*terra nullius*). And the joker is the card that Bennett always keeps up his sleeve.

---

<sup>9</sup> C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Volume 1, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1962, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black The Australian Aborigines Portrayed in Art*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1974, p. 31