



IMANTS TILLERS FROM THE STUDIO

IMANTS TILLERS FROM THE STUDIO

18 April - 26 May 2018

Imants Tillers' studio is adorned with stacks of canvasboards and piles of books – accumulations of paintings and ideas that represent more than 40 years of art practice. The works in the exhibition *From the Studio* are all drawn from this personal library of paintings, and they chronicle some of the major themes and pivotal shifts that have occurred in Tillers' career.

Since 1981, Tillers has been working on his 'canvasboard system', in which multiple painted boards are arranged in grids to form large-scale paintings. Also known as *The Book of Power*, or *One Painting*, this ongoing project incorporates every canvasboard he has ever produced and ultimately aims to accommodate all categories of knowledge. Each board in this ever-expanding, conceptual book is numbered from one to infinity. Using this methodology, Tillers has addressed an astonishing array of themes over the years, from identity and diaspora to philosophy and metaphysics.

During the 1980s, the notion of an 'Antipodean poetic'¹ was an important subject in his work. Terry Smith's influential essay *The Provincialism Problem*, published in 1974, suggested there was no avant-garde art in Australia only mimicry and imitation of international movements. Tillers' strategy of appropriation was formed in the context of this critical discourse and he used it as a way of highlighting his Antipodean origins. Acutely aware of Australia's distance from the major centres of cultural production, he became interested in the fact that art usually reached the Antipodes via printed reproductions, and began to source his imagery almost exclusively from books, catalogues or magazines. Tillers' library



continues to be his most important resource, taking pride of place in the studio.

The first major work in this exhibition, *Sigh of a Wave* 1984, is based on a reproduction of a 1983 painting by Enzo Cucchi, a leading figure in the Italian Transavanguardia movement. Tillers' scaled-up version of Cucchi's richly coloured painting was exhibited at Bess Cutler Gallery in New York, just one year after Cucchi had completed the original.² Such an exaggerated form of 'Australian mimicry' was a radical approach, eliciting shocked reactions from gallerists in New York. This style of appropriation was also quite different to other postmodern artists at the time who were appropriating masterpieces in order to disrupt dominant ideologies (for example Sherrie Levine's work challenging the patriarchy of Modernism). Tillers' borrowings, on the other hand, were not only very recent, but also celebrated, rather than challenged, the original sources.

In the compelling painting *Two Worlds* 1988, Tillers' continues his exploration of an Antipodean aesthetic by conceiving of the Antipodes as a mirror world, or parallel universe of imitations. The work is based on a painting by the Czech artist Josef Sima titled *Double Paysage* 1928, which



depicts two uncannily similar landscapes, each with crystal-like volumes in the foreground. However, the scenes are not identical, instead appearing to be rough copies of each other. This doubling effect is augmented through Tillers' addition of radiating beacons sourced from the Japanese artist Shusaku Arakawa.

The epic, fresco-like painting *Leap of Faith* 1995 includes multiple, diasporic elements, signaling a shift in Tillers' practice towards fragments of text and imagery. Earlier, in 1991, Tillers had been commissioned to produce a painting commemorating the founding donors of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, which he titled *Pure Beauty* (a homage to John Baldessari). For this immense text-based work he adopted a font used by the American conceptual artist, Robert Barry, inscribing hundreds of names into the 5.6 x 6.1-metre painting. Although not conscious of it at the time, *Pure Beauty* provided Tillers with a template for a new way of working. Phrases, place names and excerpts of poetry and philosophy began to make their way into *The Canvasboard System*, often taking on a strong compositional role.

The incorporation of text was also profoundly influenced by the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé who composed one of the first 'visual poems' in 1887, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. The typography in this seminal work changes in font and size and the words are deliberately spaced across the page amid generous sections of blank space. The unusual arrangement of text allows the poem to be read from different starting points, revealing new interpretations with each reading. This is also true of the canvasboard works; single words or phrases are typically inscribed in a non-linear fashion allowing for open-ended readings. Instead of blank space however, the texts also interact with the images, increasing the possible number of meanings. In *Melancholy Landscape V* 2010 Tillers has inscribed the

names of Australian gold mines across the picture plane, carefully positioning them according to their geographical location. With this in mind, the shimmering fragments of Rosalie Gascoigne's *Monaro* 1989 (made from golden-yellow Schweppes soft-drink crates) that are embedded in Fred Williams' *Karratha Landscape* 1981, appear to be deposits of gold buried in the earth.

During the 1990s, Tillers' technique shifted from a more regular use of oils and oil-stick to his now distinctive method of masking, cutting and layering. Largely swapping the paintbrush for the scalpel, he began to carve the defining elements of an image from masking tape before re-painting the canvasboard surface. Today, the process involves a complex system of painted layers, in which the tape is progressively shaped, painted and removed to reveal the final composition beneath. When Tillers moved to a property on the outskirts of Cooma in 1996, he set up his studio in the middle of the family home. The new situation prompted his adoption of fast-drying acrylic paints, which allowed the canvasboards to be stacked and put away at the end of each day. In this space he continued to experiment with metallic tones and coppery gouache washes, bringing a shimmering, jewel-like quality to his surfaces. Combined with the use of text, these refinements in materials and process have given rise to a highly unique aesthetic.

While the use of canvasboards has always functioned to distinguish a 'Tillers' from his appropriated sources, it is interesting to see how an increasingly original voice has developed over the years. *From the Studio* is bookended by two works that reference Giorgio de Chirico's antique horses, one painted in 1984 and the other in 2013. Their similarities and differences (in scale, content, technique and format) underline the scope, continuity and cumulative power of *The Canvasboard System*.

¹ Graham Coulter-Smith 'The Development of the Canvasboard System', *Imants Tillers: Journey to Nowhere*, Power Publications, The University of Sydney, Sydney and The Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, 2018.
² This is the first time *Sigh of a Wave* has been exhibited in Australia.



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

The Dichotomy 1984
synthetic polymer paint on 16
canvasboards, nos. 4028-4043
101.6 x 152.2 cm

Sigh of a Wave 1984
synthetic polymer paint on 100
canvasboards nos. 2962-3061
254 x 380 cm

*Higher Being's Command: Paint the
Top Right Hand Corner Black!* 1984
charcoal on 18 canvasboards, nos. 3738-
3755
152.5 x 114 cm

Polkegeist 1986
oil-stick, oil, synthetic polymer paint on 222
canvasboards, nos. 10485-10706
279 x 665 cm

Two Worlds 1988
synthetic polymer paint on 165, nos.
17713-17877
279.4 x 571.5 cm

Tomb 1988
oil stick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint
on 48 canvasboards, nos. 17665-17712
229 x 203 cm
Leap of Faith 1995

oil-stick, synthetic polymer paint, gouache
on 120 canvasboards, nos. 41884-42130
304.8 x 381 cm

Melancholy Landscape V 2010
synthetic polymer paint, gouache on 72
canvasboards, nos. 88404-88475
216 x 268.8 cm

The Mysterious Animal 2013
synthetic polymer paint, gouache

on 25 canvasboards nos. 92299-
92323
203 x 177 cm

Capricornia 2018
synthetic polymer paint, gouache on
40 canvasboards, nos. 102624-102663
203 x 177 cm



THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE
Callaghan 2308

E gallery@newcastle.edu.au
W newcastle.edu.au/universitygallery
T + 61 2 4921 5255

IMAGE | ABOVE: Imants Tillers, *Two Worlds*, 1988, oil-stick, synthetic polymer paint on
165 canvasboards, nos. 17713-17877, 279.4 x 571.5 cm

IMAGE | FRONT COVER: Imants Tillers, *Melancholy Landscape V*, 2010, synthetic

polymer paint, gouache on 72 canvasboards, nos. 88404-88475, 216 x 268.8 cm

IMAGE | INSIDE RIGHT: Imants Tillers installing *Two Worlds* 1988 at his studio in
Chippendale, Sydney, 1988. Photograph: Jennifer Slatyer

IMAGE | INSIDE CENTRE: Imants Tillers' studio, 2017. Photograph: Jennifer Slatyer

Imants Tillers is represented by:

Arc One Gallery, Melbourne
Bett Gallery, Hobart
Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane
Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide Jan
Manton Gallery, Brisbane
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

THE UNIVERSITY
GALLERY