

Trevor Nickolls: an urban gift

SUZANNE SPUNNER

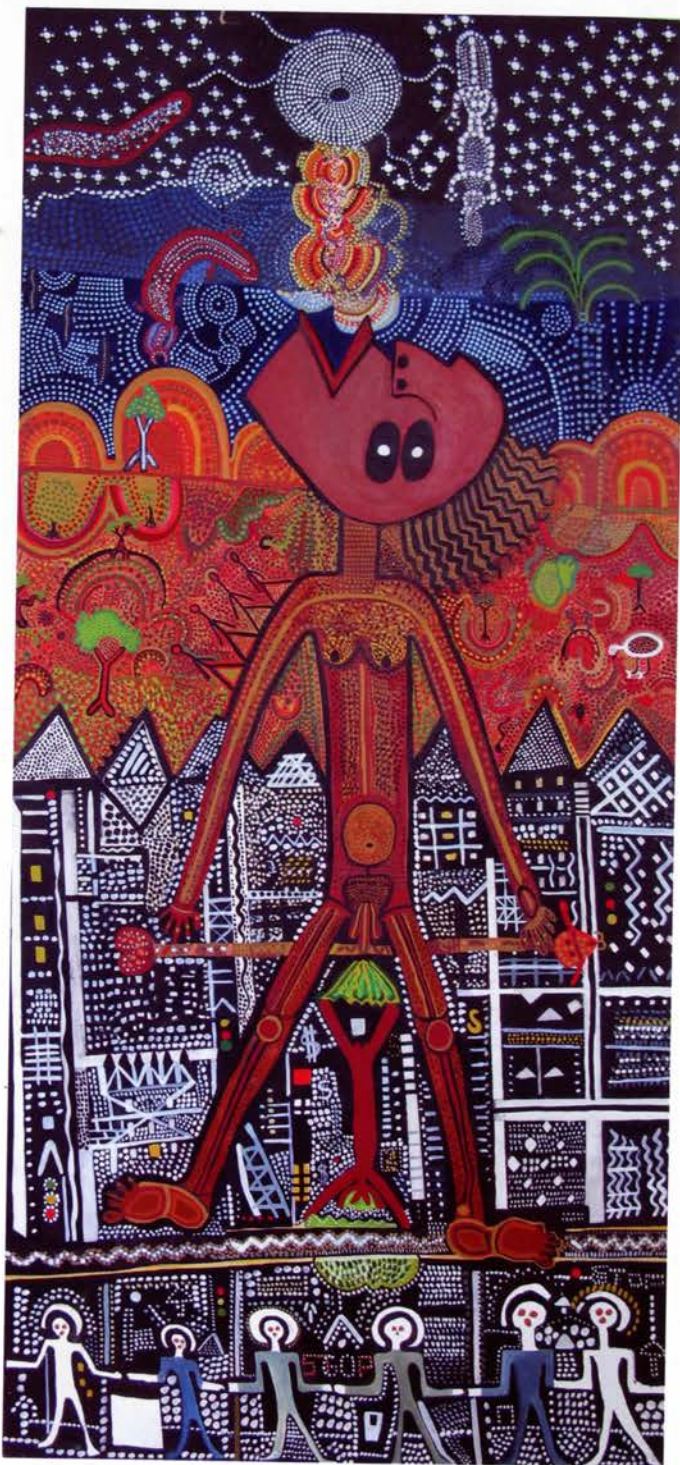
OPENING TREVOR NICKOLLS'S RETROSPECTIVE, *Other side art*, at Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum, Professor Marcia Langton said that it seemed as if he had always been there like Elvis, the background music throughout her adult life; the period of modern Aboriginal consciousness. The ubiquity of Trevor Nickolls is due to the influence he has had over the urban artists who came after him and they owe him in the same way so many Aboriginal artists owe Namatjira, for showing that making art was a possible way of life and living; what Brenda L. Croft has called 'Albert's gift'.

Nickolls was arguably the founding father of the so-called urban Aboriginal art movement and in his work you see many of its tropes: the kitsch reclamation of the diorama black dolly; the fierce, bloody polemic; the use of overt symbols and puns; the bright-lit carnival colours; the wholesale raiding of Western art's cultural armoury; the to-ing and fro-ing about using traditional marks in *rarrk* and dots. Nickolls's poetry and punning constantly materialise language, a tendency that Richard Bell, Gordon Hookey and Gordon Bennett have made into an artform. Just as Nickolls's many alter egos prefigure Bennett's John Citizen. Without Nickolls, how and where might Destiny Deacon, Robert Campbell Jr, Lin Onus, Harry Wedge, Ian Abdullah and Julie Dowling have begun?

The child of an Aboriginal mother and a Scottish father, Nickolls grew up in the outer industrial suburbs of Adelaide under the shadow of Namatjira and he began art school around the time of the beginnings of Papunya Tula. He was an unusually sensitive child and was directed to art early on. His first discovery was Picasso – the Picasso of *Guernica*; the head turned sideways looking up at a foreboding sky terrified and pleading for release. That head has been a continuous recurrent presence in Nickolls's work; it is often serrated like a cut-out cardboard crown or a sawtooth factory roof.

Self-portrait manifests in many forms and is frequently doubled: playing cards, Janus faces, Gemini figures and double-headed optical illusions. Now you see me, now you don't; I am seen and I am hiding, or I am hidden; obscured and covered over by that other part of myself. Sometimes the doubling takes the form of inversion, the card figures that read upside down or the faces that divide along their own the profile, mourning for the lost twin, his other self, to make two complete selves. The split selves grow and proliferate, into the split-world dialectic of modernity: Dreamtime and 'machinetime', nature/nurture, spirit/ commerce.

Trevor Nickolls is a child of his times and there is also a strain of pure seventies countercultural homage to Van Gogh that aligns Nickolls with Brett Whiteley and





Martin Sharp in the psychodaelia of Ginger Meggs and the R. Crumb cartoon character potheads. Nickolls does a good line in wacko suburbia: Holden cars, Hills hoists, magpies and footy fields which have affinities with Reg Mombassa and Mimmo Cozzolino. Nickolls's jaunty Sylvester sock snake might be a version of Rover Thomas's rainbow serpent who wrought cyclonic destruction on Darwin, but he looks like a well-fed beatnik sporting an artist's beret at a rakish slant and bearing the message; 'art rang, Vincent rang and boome(r)ang' – da-da-da-da!! A vaudeville routine within a Dadaist performance.

Nickolls went as far as making his own frames for his paintings, but usually figures and events are played out within the frame as if on a stage. The buildings are architecturally elaborate but they are like stage sets. As a teenager Nickolls worked at Her Majesty's Theatre in Adelaide, seeing show after show. These works live within the proscenium arch; set pieces, not places to inhabit. You want to look behind them rather than go into them. Theatricality and artifice, fashion parades and the catwalk all become places to perform Aboriginality. The mass media has always fascinated him. As a child he thought he was a radio and went around recording and commentating on the world around him: 'I am a camera or a VCR', so icons of video cameras and Mickey Mouse ears are often seen lurking in the corner of a work. The machinetime is ever present, recording and monitoring everything. Nickolls's telephones have faces, they call you and watch you. Looking at his work requires entering into his world with its obsessive, cabalistic enumeration of universal and personal symbols, located within a grab-bag of charms and totems.



P14: 1/ *Tightrope walking*, 1980, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 191.8 x 91.7cm. VCA Art Collection, the University of Melbourne; gift of the artist 1980. Photograph: VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery.
 2/ *The end of a dream*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 90 x 90cm. Collection of Dr L and Mrs K Kritharides, Sydney.
 P15: 1/ *Mother Earth and Father Space (Stealing a kiss during the war against humanity)*, 2004, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150 x 180cm. The Arthur Roe Collection, Melbourne.
 2/ *Metamorphosis*, 2006, charcoal on paper, 70 x 50cm. Collection of Vivien Anderson and Gilles Terrier, Melbourne.
 All images © and courtesy the artist, Trevor Nickolls.

Nickolls's political perspective runs through the work as a clear seam but it is rarely ideological. There are works directly addressing deaths in custody and the fall of the SA Bank but they in turn generate powerful universal symbols – the imprisoned head, the bars of the jail, and the dollar sign – to denote opposition to spirit and nature. The form of the dollar sign is another sort of threatening snake in the grass. His most interesting and elliptical political work, *Big Boss hat*, is an indictment of all forms of white patriarchal authority; unfortunately it was not available for the Melbourne leg of the tour.

Nickolls met Papunya artist Dinny Nolan at the Victorian College of the Arts while he was doing postgraduate study, and for a while adopted dotting but in true Nickolls's fashion it was transformed into a formalised pointillism that we see in lyrical works like *Manly Dreaming*. Later he spent time as a specialist art teacher at Darwin High and was exposed to the lush tropical landscape of the Top End, and he painted a series of works under the loose idea of the Garden of Eden where man and woman, black and white, plants and animals live together in utopian harmony. The mid-1980s saw him make a sequence of abstracted, elegant Tiwi-inspired landscapes, geometric and cross-hatched in tasteful, restful ochre colours; reds, taupes and olive greens.

In 1990 Nickolls was selected by Michael O'Ferrall, then curator of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and paired with the East Kimberley artist Rover Thomas to represent Australia in the Venice Biennale, making them the first Indigenous artists so appointed. The combination of the über urban artist and the Kimberley cowboy who worked exclusively in ground ochre was irresistible to the media, both a critical coup and a provocation. If there had been any doubt about 'urban' as an accepted category, and if the taint of 'transitional' hung over Thomas, all was now swept aside. Nickolls and Thomas became the face of contemporary Aboriginal art under the rubric 'neither dots nor bark'. Three weeks in Venice and time in Rome exposed Nickolls to art with a capital A, and he soaked it all up, seeing Van Gogh, Picasso and Giotto in the flesh. It was a feast, a garden of earthly delights. Just look at the painting where he depicts himself lounging in the big chair in Peggy Guggenheim's garden; he might be overwhelmed but he is certainly in his element.

Venice made Rover Thomas famous and Nickolls contributed to Thomas's fame by his marvellous depictions of Thomas in a green satin, red-fringed rodeo shirt, proper-tall crowned Kimberley cowboy hat, and the snakeskin boots Nickolls had bought for him. Thomas became the star of the show in an elaborate play Nickolls dramaturged and peopled with subordinate characters: a Wandjina family surround

the mythic Rover roving in Thomas town, with Wanda Wandjina, bug-eyed, her afro hair a halo, gorgeous in her little miniskirt and carrying her dillybag like an attentive dolly bird. Trevor the man is there, cool in his shades, driving the old green FJ Holden, keeping the show on the road – or one of his alter egos, the serrated head man, the blue man with the striped singlet is there, larger than life, standing in centre-stage for the artist.

Only Thomas's portrait remains stable and fixed, a lodestar for Nickolls to steer by and in some ways prefigures Nickolls himself growing older; as if Nickolls now sees himself in the image of Rover Thomas. Nickolls has returned to depictions of Thomas since Venice, and in 2002 after he finally visited the Kimberley, he painted *Other side art*. The sign he saw at Warmun was simply a direction to where the art shed was located but for Nickolls the meaning is apprehended as a poetic metaphor and it has become an apt title for this exhibition. In 1998 around the time of Thomas's death, Nickolls painted a poignant work, *Roving free*: a boat is travelling in a sea of stars, a wooden ark ferried by a Wandjina and Rover floats by as if happily farewelling the world. Nickolls said it came about after he saw photographs of his friend confined to a wheelchair looking frail. It came from sadness but is transcendent and joyous and serves as an emblem for Nickolls's work. ○

Other side art: a survey of paintings and drawings 1972-2007, curated by Michael O'Ferrall, is an Ian Potter Museum of Art and NETS Victoria touring exhibition. It was first shown at The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 13 May to 2 August 2009 (and complemented by *Trevor Nickolls: New and Important early paintings and drawings*, at Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, 12 May to 12 June 2009). The exhibition's final venue (and 'homecoming' for Nickolls) is Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 22 October to 17 December 2010.

Suzanne Spinner is a playwright and critic. She is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Melbourne, researching the *oeuvre* of Rover Thomas.

CALL FOR ENTRIES
9 - 18 September 2011 Currumbin Beach Qld

information + awards & acquisitions
www.swellsculpture.com.au

ENTRIES CLOSE - MARCH 15, 2011
email: artist@swellsculpture.com.au

Andrew Cullen - Dune Grass Photography by Duncan Fitzpatrick

SWELL
SCULPTURE FESTIVAL
-Getting art out there-

MAJOR PARTNERS



Swell Sculpture Festival acknowledges the assistance of the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.