



# Spaces to engulf the eye

An artist's work sets out his experience of Australia as it has changed over 25 years



**T**he four major indoor visual arts exhibitions in the Perth International Arts Festival together make a quiet, still and reflective experience.

Oscar Munoz at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Of Art and Music at the John Curtin Gallery, Larrakitj at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Imants Tillers: The Long Poem at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery achieve a refined connection through their, at times, elegiac atmospheres.

Tillers' Long Poem is a collection of canvas boards that, when put together as you might a jigsaw, creates a visual experience which stays with you long after you leave the building.

Elegant and steeped in personal and cultural nuance, walking through Tillers' extensive exhibition, with more than 20 big works, is a little like enjoying Homer's Odyssey or Jack Kerouac's On the Road. It is a novel of the age, an ode to the cultural climate of the past 25 years in Australia seen through the eyes of a first-generation Australian (his parents arrived from Latvia in the late 1940s).

The politics of being either in the middle of things or very much on the outer comes to the fore in Tillers' painting, so too a search for identity, transcendence and an ongoing attempt to understand the underlying web of cultural connections that define not only Australia but one's own place in the world.

His support of choice is the innocuous canvas board, most commonly seen around art students' studios, which is not too forgiving to paint application. However, the dry finish they provide well suits Tillers' project. Put together, these boards can build enormous landscapes that

engulf the eye, forcing the body to move along the paintings, picking out lines of text, visual references and political motifs.

Not only is the work about spaces of influence, the work becomes a space of influence and I enjoyed this ability Tillers has of making the work literally enact its own subject matter. There are more than 3500 canvas boards in this exhibition, each one is numbered in order, and the cinematic scope of the work draws you in from the moment you see his epic *Lacrimae Rerum* (for *Dzidra*) from the entrance door.

The final painting from his *Diaspora* series, this work is a map of sorts of the ghost towns of Australia. *Lacrimae Rerum*, translated as "the tears of things", exemplifies Tillers' ability to extend the act of charting well beyond location towards a more personal response to speaking and thinking a place into existence. In Tillers' work, place and self somehow meld into experience and memory. This painting invokes the burden of loss and suffering the title refers to as does it remind us of Tillers' love of epics (the Latin quote comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*). Significantly in the top left hand corner of *Lacrimae Rerum* Tillers has written the words "the poetics of ghosts and the failure of locality".

In a way, although specifically relative to this work, this sums up the complete dialogue of Tillers' oeuvre, the desire for stability, longevity and order oozes from his methodology but also the realisation that we are all walking memories of information and experience that are in constant need of attention and rearrangement. This map of ghost towns is as eerie a work as Tillers has put forward.

The Long Poem reads well in

itself as an exhibition, taking the viewer on a journey through some of Tillers' earlier works, like *Island of the Dead* and *White Aborigines*, through some of his collaborative works like *Fatherland* up to the incredibly sophisticated later works. Under-represented is his *Nature Series*.

As coarse as an earlier work like *White Aborigines* might be, it illustrates well how far Tillers has come as a narrator, and indeed how prolific he is.

His discussion of the centre and decentralisation of the art world is interesting enough, but matching this up with a unique understanding of the associations between great landscape painters such as Richter and McCahon and contemporary indigenous painters such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Michael Jagamara Nelson, in a purely aesthetic sense, is intelligent.

This is, of course, beyond the past controversies Tillers has found himself in over the usage of Aboriginal imagery. But in seeing his earlier works up against later, more sophisticated works, one can plainly see the transition of understanding in Tillers' journey as a painter and here I agree with Howard Morphy's comments in the accompanying catalogue.

Tillers in some way mirrors contemporary art's evolving understandings of Aboriginal art and Australia's broadening notions of its own identity in the world. In this sense, viewing Tiller's journey at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery can only make you feel more positive about where we are heading as a nation.

**Imants Tillers: The Long Poem is at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery, UWA, until April 21.**



Impressive: Imants Tillers' show The Long Poem, with, in the foreground, Lacrimae Rerum (for Dzidra)