

Imants tillers essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Mount Analogue is a post-modern artwork by Imants Tillers painted in 1985. This work can be said to be a post-modern piece as Tiller has utilised several techniques common to this style. Bricolage is the creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available. In this case, Tiller, out of necessity, created his canvas board system. This particular artwork is an appropriation of the rather majestic painting 'North- East view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko' by Eugene von Guerard, produced in 1863. Tillers has re-contextualised the work and given it added value for the present time. 'Mt Analogue' explores ideas of authorship and originality through his use of appropriation. He has used one hundred and sixty five canvas board panels jig-sawed together to contrast with von Guerard's meticulous nineteenth century depiction. Von Guerard's painting was a result of its time; Von Guerard's painting is based on sketches he made as part of a scientific expedition to record variations of the earth's magnetic fields in 1862, and he recorded the new nation through European eyes.

Although von Guerard attempted to very accurately portray the features of the new country, he used the techniques and conventions of the time. So, it seems odd that a modern Australian artist would take this piece and be moved to reinvent it. By replicating such a significant image in Australian art history Tillers challenges the traditional notion of what art is. Imants Tillers uses elements of post modernism to recreate, appropriate the original painting and manages to make it a mystical experience.

Tillers was drawn to Australian-born artist Eugene von Guerard's image partly because of the art-historical associations of the land and the

mountains, and partly due to a book he read. Imants Tillers' title, *Mount Analogue*, is taken from the title of a novel by the French author Rene Daumal. This novel follows an expedition in search of a symbolic mountain, a mountain that will 'play the role of Mount Analogue'. *Mount Analogue* is also a parable of the spiritual journey of the self.

Tillers saw a spiritual connection in the image of Mount Kosciusko, therefore, reproduced it with a slightly different meaning than the original romantic painting by von Guerard. Discrepancies in von Guerard's naming of the site occurred partly because the name of the location was by no means fixed at the time. Rather than being the highest peak, as some supposed it to be, it was the second highest that became officially known as Mount Townsend in 1892, in honour of Thomas Townsend, who conducted a survey of the Snowy Mountains in 1846–47.

This refers back to the inspiration for the painting, the book *Mount Analogue*, where the mountain does not exist, just as 'North- East view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko' was not actually exist. In 'Mount Analogue', the mountain site is framed by a dramatic rock formation in the foreground as well as a wind-blown, caped figure gesturing towards the expansive landscape. The middle ground captures the circular peak formation, covered in crisp white snow. The background consists of a serene sunset sky, with a hint of an approaching storm in the top left corner.

The use of separate canvas boards is what gives this artwork a post-modern appearance. The audience can see that not all of the images on the canvas boards match up perfectly, this adds texture and interest which is also a part

of the artists style. Also the artwork references the old fashion analogue televisions, where the picture is made up of lots of little squares close up, like a dot matrix, but looks like a picture from further away. Overall, Tillers depicts an accurate portrayal of Mount Analogue which symbolises, for him, a personal spiritual journey of accomplishment and admiration for the beauty of nature.

Mountains are symbolic of higher thinking, spirituality, being closer to heaven; Guerard version is as a result of scientific observation; Tillers takes this to a more symbolic level using textual and gestural techniques. Tillers has a distinctive artistic style that is easily recognisable. He has a strategy of appropriating images from reproductions of artworks and other sources, and re-working them. Each board is like a grain of sand on a beach, or stone on a mountainside - all go to make up the whole. In painting his work, Tillers dramatically enlarged the scale of von Guerard's colonial image, creating a new work in its place.

It is of a monumental scale when compared to the original. The new sizing meant that the image was at once more present to the viewer, giving the impression that one can enter the landscape, but also more abstract, due to the grid left by the canvas-boards. Tillers' painterly surface jar with the parts of the boards that don't quite match, forcing the viewer to see this as appropriation, the illusion of space, the changes in perspectives. Tillers copies the form and line of the original piece, following an organic, natural shape and line.

The shapes are irregular, yet the canvas-board system distorts the overall image to give a muted geometric feel. The boards give strong angles and create a sense that a grid has been laid over the environment. The organic shapes create forms that are three dimensional, giving depth to the mountain landscape. A sense of balance is achieved between the stormy sky and the rugged mountain tops. The texture of the sky also contrasts with the texture of the landscape. The eye is directed by the caped figure's wide gestures, an invitation to walk into the view.

The figure itself is small, dwarfed by the scale and majesty of the environment. The viewer is directed in a horizontal line, following the movement from the stormy and stony left to the calmer right of the picture. Tillers has used warm colours in the landscape, reflected in the clouds. Greys and blues shape the distant mountain tops and the stormy clouds. Blacks, browns and greys give texture to the rocky outcrops and draw one into the view. All this combines to give a rather more deeply and intensely atmospheric mood to the piece than von Guerards.

Superimposed on all this, the viewer sees the grid creating a repetitive pattern. One can then choose to see the work as panels, a jigsaw, or a whole slightly distorted image overlaid with a grid, somewhat like a map. Imants Tillers was born in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, from immigrant parents. As a result, for a long time Tillers felt himself to be Latvian. It was only after he and his family had spent some time in Latvia that he realised that he was really Australian. This identity confusion may have given him an attraction to the works of von Guerard, giving them a common background.

Tillers had always been very interested in the German art movements as well, again drawing him to von Guerard. Tillers developed a reputation as one of Australia's most thought-provoking contemporary artists during the late 1970's and 80's. During this time, Tillers established an international reputation, having his work shown in group exhibitions, including at PS1 in New York and Documenta in Kassel. Tiller's inspirations have come from an interest in post-Second World War German art, and a great respect for artists such as New Zealand painter Colin McCahon. 'Mount Analogue' in particular shows Tillers commitment to place, an exploration of what it is to be Australian and interact with our environment. Tillers has lived and/or worked in three distinctly different studios: a home studio located on the foreshores of Little Sirius Cove in Sydney's Mosman; a top-floor warehouse in inner-city Chippendale; and the current studio - located in the family home, Blairgowrie - situated 400 kilometres south of Sydney on the outskirts of Cooma, in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains.

While the shifting conditions and dramatic developments in the local and global art scenes have had a direct impact on Tillers' art the physical constraints of each studio - and the aspects of ordinary, everyday existence - have also played their part in contributing to the unique processes that form his style. It was in Little Sirius Cove that he began experiments with painting on canvas board that soon became the images that later became the 'Book of Power' - now numbering nearly 80 000 panels. (The 'Book' contains all his work...Tillers believes that this in itself is an artistic statement.

He stacks his canvas-boards as sculptural pieces, as well as displaying them as visual works.) So the canvas board system took shape. These were thin,

wooden panels with bevelled edges. The reasons for using this medium was a bit ordinary – they were portable and economical! The canvas boards were soon established as a highly efficient means of producing paintings on a monumental scale within a cramped studio space, and the process of assembling and de-assembling, stacking and unstacking, installing and de-installing became integral to the development of the canvas board system.

With his numbered canvas boards, grids and stacks, Tillers' works come under a rule-governed system that proposes an infinite series. It was here that the iconic work for Mount Analogue was produced when Tillers was about 35 years old. He experimented with charcoal, pencils, and oils, producing hundreds of images before he committed to paint. He was very aware of the developments in art in Europe, and followed developments carefully. Tillers, on 'Mount Analogue' I discovered one could produce monumental images in quite modest circumstances ... I have a water jar and two little plates, one for metallic colours and one for black, and then just the paints [and] a few rags ... This work was done in my studio at home in Mosman, in a ten-foot by twelve-foot room. I just did it in sections. I didn't actually ever see it in my studio because I couldn't ever install it anywhere ..." " This work is one of the first where I started using oilstick, which comes in tubes. It is a bit like using your fingers.

It is very hard to get much detail. They get blunt very quickly ... The ground was also a new departure. I used metallic paint, which had only just become more available at that time ... Apart from the beautiful colour that it gives you, it was also an allusion to Carl Andre's metallic floor pieces ... So this work was a departure for both those reasons" Tillers As Tillers showed his

work in the USA and Europe, many saw that he was “ partly admiring and partly ironical” as he appropriated and synthesised his images.

While Tiller was refining his work during the 1980’s it was a time of optimism and growth. For example, it was at this time that Apple Mac introduced the Macintosh 128k and the CD-ROM was introduced. Computer images were to play an important part in Tillers art of the 1990’s to present time. The types of art presented a great cultural feeling to this decade. The general type of art during the 1980’s was mostly modern and contemporary and it was also the Me! Me! Me! Generation. Ken Done and Pro Hart were popular artists who had a huge commercial impact in this decade.

In the early 1980s Australian film, music and literature were receiving international recognition but Australian visual art – which was enjoying a new energy with the establishment of the Australia’s National Association for the Visual Arts – had not been much shown in the United States. It was with the exhibition, An Australian Accent came the first time Tillers had shown in the USA. By the mid 1980s, Paul Hogan’s film ‘ Crocodile Dundee’ reinforced the image of a macho pioneer tradition. Australians, so different in speech and attitude, were ‘ flavour of the month’.

Tillers’ work from the 1980’s, as seen in Mount Analogue, can be seen as a migrant’s sense of struggle to establish a place in an ‘ Typical Aussie’ society. Tillers tries to deal with two shifting images, or histories: the European past and the multicultural now. Popular culture of the 1980’s showed Australia as having a fixed national identity (Crocodile Dundee): Tillers used von Guerards work to question that, trying to get us to think

more deeply about what it is to be Australian, reflecting on our past, the land and our interpretation of the land.