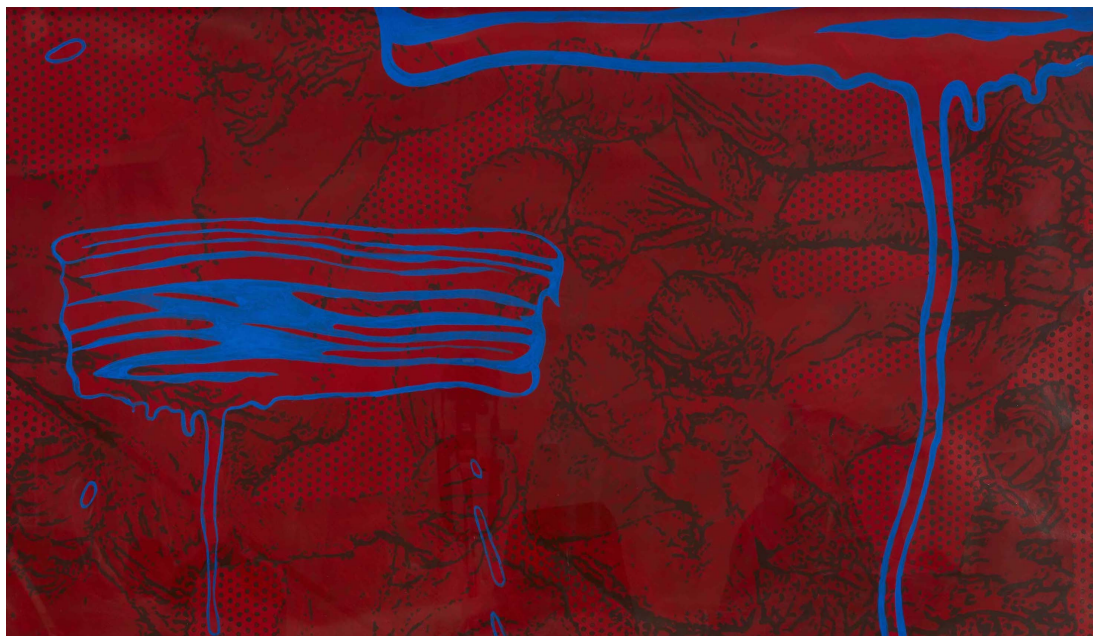


Advanced DefJam

Mark Titmarsh

Text of a talk given at 16albermarle on 4 September 2020



Mark Titmarsh

Advanced DefJam 1987, acrylic on paper 180 x 100 cm

I would like to place my painting *Advanced DefJam* (1987) in the context of its place, time and ideas.

The place where the work was made was the old Sargeant's Pie Factory on the corner of Burton and Palmer Streets in Darlinghurst in Sydney. It was a four story early 20th century building once a factory for the industrial production of meat pies, then an unofficial arts centre. It had the Actors Studio on the first floor, on the ground floor Marc Newson was working on prototypes for his Lockheed Lounge, and I was on the third floor with Louise Olsen and Stephen Ormandy of Dinosaur Designs, who were developing their early resin casts. I painted *Advanced DefJam* and *Purposes...* there amongst others in the years before the building was demolished in the late 80s to make way for luxury apartments. Darlinghurst had been and still is a bohemia of Sydney artists, misfits and alternative lifestyles.

The time was the 1980s, the era when the word 'postmodernism' in the visual arts and every other discipline was being used in distinction to the modern period and attitudes. Briefly modern art, even 70s art, was primarily purist, devoted to abstraction, and the political/conceptual rejection of popular culture and consumerism. In the 80s artists and filmmakers began to move out of the exclusiveness of modernism to include all sorts of images and ideas from various ages and cultures, including popular culture, cinema and mass media. In my

paintings and films from that time I drew from television, cinema, art magazines, books and newspapers to build a bank of images and references to deconstruct and reconstruct the world around me.

I was also heavily involved in the Super 8 filmmaking scene in Sydney. My filmmaking was very much like my painting practice in that I tended to take (quote or appropriate according to the language of the time) whatever captured my attention. This was an extension of my childhood experience of being a latchkey child, coming home from school every day to watch television till bedtime, thereby developing a series of visual fascinations that would take a lifetime to unpack and fully understand. Looking became more than just the act of seeing. It was a kind of instant incorporation into the library of cultural memory which I developed further by taking my super 8 camera with me whenever I went to the movies. If a scene excited me I would whip it out and shoot it off the big screen, and edit it back into one of my films within a couple of weeks.

It felt like the same thing was going on with sampling culture in popular music, particularly hip hop and rap. So my painting *Advanced DefJam* was named after a line in a Beastie Boys song called "She's on it." The 'she' of the song was studying a subject called Advanced DefJam, with DefJam being a 'definitive song,' and the name of the label that the Beastie Boys were signed to. Advanced DefJam suggested to me the idea that you could study culture, pop culture in particular and essentialise it, define what would 'work', just like a record label might predict which band might produce a 'hit', something that spoke to an audience in the moment.

Overall the painting was made like a collage, in that I brought together several sources to it - a Lichtenstein brushstroke, that was in itself a spoof of Abstract Expressionism, an image of a Robert Longo sculpture that pastiched Michelangelo's sculpture *Battle of the Centaurs*, and the Ben Day dots that were used in Pop Art to refer to the printing process of comics and mass produced imagery found in newspapers and telephone books.

The final visual element of the work was the relation of the two main colours, red and blue. The blue brushstroke floated over the top of the red background creating a flicker effect in the eye, almost a direct physical touch reaching from paint to the visual cortex.

I would like to mention two other works in the show stand out in relation to the practice and the ideas of postmodernism.

The Ian Burn work *A landscape is not something you look at, but something you look through* 1992 is a painting, or is it a sculpture, a construction, a riddle? Ian Burn was an accomplished artist and writer who contributed to the idea that 'artists who write' are an important part of the story of art, validating my own drive to write about art and make art with similar degrees of intensity.



Ian Burn

A landscape is not something you look at ... 1993

Ink screen-printed on synthetic polymer sheet, oil on wood frame, screws, 31.6 x 36.8 x 11 cm

The work in this show is his first *Value Added Landscape* that he did in a series up until his untimely death the following year. The painting continues a discussion he had developed in his writing on the story of Australian landscape and the idea of landscape in general. He argued that a landscape was not a slice of the visual world that appeared on a flat surface like a painting, but was something spatially complex that you looked through in all its layers and views and potential relationships. The title references his earlier series of works titled *Looking through a Piece of Glass* 1967-8, which created the perceptual conundrum of either looking through a piece of transparent glass or focussing on the text printed behind the glass, without being able to do both at the same time. The *Value Added Landscapes* were created by choosing, almost curating, amateur paintings from his local St Vincent De Paul's then overlaying them with text. His choices of works were noticeably subtle, or at least the amateur paintings demonstrated a facility with paint and colour. Burn himself had been an amateur landscapist before he undertook formal art training at the National Gallery School in Melbourne in the 1960s.

At one level Ian Burn is the most important Australian artist of all since he is the only Australian to have been a key figure in an international art movement, namely, Conceptual Art. He was there in London in the 60s with Mel Ramsden, and then in NYC in the 1970s where he worked with artists like Joseph Kosuth and others, to produce exhibitions, texts, magazines, writings and works that were seminal for Conceptual Art. The only reason he is not known as well as Kosuth in the USA and

Art and Language in Europe is that he is an Australian. Here we have no comparable institutional or collector base to project his work and legacy widely. Ian helped me navigate a complex situation in my postgrad studies in painting at Sydney College of the Arts and in my efforts to move through various considerations of what I was calling at that time Conceptual Painting, now Expanded Painting. His generosity of spirit and understanding of local and international practices still works on me today.



Mark Titmarsh discussing work by Ian Burn at 16albermarle, 4 September 2020

The other work I would like to mention is a series by Tim Johnson that is almost a road map of his evolution in relation to indigenous Papunya painting. He too like Ian Burn was a conceptual artist who for some time rejected painting as too conservative an art form, and then found a new way to reconnect with painting. For me the series begins with the photo that Tim took of indigenous artists with a canvas on the ground, standing around in the shade under a tree. This becomes the subject matter for a painting where we see the indigenous artists depicted in realist terms and the contents of their painting, showing traditional lines and circles relating to dreaming and totems. In a later work with similar subject matter he begins to use the dot painting technique he had learned from the Papunya artists. The final painting in this cluster is a work in which he has collaborated with Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, who has depicted his Rock Wallaby dreaming while Tim has

painted the dots. Dot painting learnt at Papunya then became a major visual component of his later work as exemplified by another painting in the show, *Maitreya Paradise*. In this work the dots have become a unifying visual technique for the subject matter that is now Eastern and Buddhist, his major interest up until the present day.



Installation view, works by Tim Johnson in Re/production at 16albermarle