

Richard Bell *Bell's Theorem*



Figure 1: Bell R (2003) *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* [Acrylic on canvas] 240×360 cm, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin collection, image: courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Richard Bell's painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* (2003) utilises art historical references to expose power relations within the Aboriginal art market and its relationship to broader contemporary art movements. The painting, alongside its attendant essay, *Bell's Theorem: ABORIGINAL ART - It's a white thing!*, is an interrogation of the act of appropriation within the context of a settler colony where expropriation of land is the 'original sin', while laying bare the contradictions of an Aboriginal art movement built on this premise. This essay will demonstrate how Bell employs colour, pattern and text to support the assertion overtly emblazoned on its very surface: that Aboriginal art is a 'WHITE thing'.

Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem) is the best known of the *Bell's Theorum* series, taking its title from *Locality Fails*, an essay by Australian appropriation artist Imants Tillers (Butler and Thomas 2003). The essay mobilises John Bell's original theorem, a development in quantum physics which demonstrated 'the possibility of seemingly being in two places at once' (McClean 2014:633) to delegitimise the regional classification of art and thereby legitimise Tillers' appropriation of Aboriginal art. Meanwhile, Bell is 'appropriating it not simply in the sense that he quotes it, but also in the sense that he literally (and arbitrarily) claims it as his own, as "Bell's"' (McClean 2014:633).

At 240x360cm, the acrylic painting's domineering scale intensifies the controversial quip that forms its focal point: 'ABORIGINAL ART It's A WHITE thing'. A red-lined equilateral triangle is brandished across the top of these words, slicing twice across the word 'ABORIGINAL' and encompassing the rest of the text. The statement is spelt out across five lines in five fonts, set against a syncopated diagonal strip of many overlapping rectangles detailed with different colourful geometric patterns. Some patterns allude to minimalism while others allude to motifs of the Papunya Tula Central Desert art movement (Lionus 2021). The aggregate effect is a clear reference to Tillers, whose large paintings are characteristically composed of many small rectangle boards, contain text and, in some cases, appropriate Papunya Tula motifs (McClean 2014). The tiles fade off into black on the left and white on the right, tones which are drizzled over the top of the work a la Jackson Pollock (McClean 2014). The result is a cacophony of colour, pattern and line; monochrome and bright, organic and geometric, all layered in flat planes that serve to momentarily obscure the punchline that is the text.

The high contrast of the black and white background sets off the synthetic, vibrant hues of the patterned tiles to achieve a cheerful pop aesthetic. The use of the same pigments throughout the patterns of different origins is historically accurate as it was indeed the material innovation of using synthetic polymer paint on 'the detritus of the white community' to elaborate on the 'ochres and plant matter of the ephemeral ground paintings used in ceremony' (Perkins & Finke 2000:174) that catapulted the Papunya Tula paintings into the contemporary art world in the seventies. It is notable that the black and white sit on opposite sides of the canvas. While opposite colours are usually referred to as 'complimentary' in colour theory, 'antagonistic' seems more pertinent a word to describe Bell's use of black and white, with each formal property in the work blasting through colonial mirages of reconciliation (Wolfe 2006). Bell's use of black

and white to frame the artwork reiterates the reality that the relationship between coloniser and colonised is categorically antagonistic (Wolfe 2006).

Bell candidly appropriates the patterns of abstract expressionism, minimalism and Papunya Tula dot painting in a multi-pronged attack on the 'romantic stereotyping...of...repressive authenticity' (Wolfe 2006:16). By juxtaposing the iterated rectangular and linear motifs of abstract minimalism with the round motifs used in the Papunya Tula art movement, attention is drawn to their formal parallels which questions why the Papunya Tula movement is relegated to an ethnographic realm rather than being considered 'among the World's best examples of Abstract Expressionism' (Bell 2002). The implication is that the Aboriginal artist is incapable of making work that has any relevance beyond their own 'tjukurpa', an ontology which is infantilized and othered by a long lineage of western anthropological interpretation (Bell 2002). The relationship between Aboriginal art and Aboriginal spirituality is legally sanctioned by the Native Title Act which demands Aboriginal people use art, song and dance to 'prove that [they] are related to the birds, the animals, the insects, the microbes, the Earth, the Wind and fire' (Bell 2002) in order to have title to their ancestral lands. Not only does this undermine cultural heritage by putting it under scrutiny of colonial judges, it insists that the 'authentic' Aboriginal person is one whose cultural connection has been the least severed. Combined with the historical reality that colonisation of Australia started on the coast, working its way inland in inverse correlation to the moral defensibility of 'frontier homicide' (Wolfe 1998:403), a correlation between authenticity and province is engineered (Bell 2002). Bell's innovation in *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* is recognizing the incentive to perform this constructed authenticity for 'economic, political and cultural capital' within the Aboriginal art market (Lionus 2021:610).

The jaunty aesthetic achieved by Bell's use of different fonts is unsettled by the reminder of the statement; that there is something incommensurable about the development of an art market selling Indigenous work within the value system of settler colonial capitalism. Claiming Aboriginal art as a 'white thing', Bell points out that '[e]very attempt at reconciliation, every attempt to reflect on Aboriginal art... —it is all wrong from the beginning, all countable as one item or another on the unending list of flawed consequences of an initially invalid premise.' (Butler and Thomas 2003:36) The material manifestation of this theoretical incommensurability is explored in his attendant essay, *Bell's Theorem - Aboriginal Art, It's a White Thing*, where he dissects the labour conditions for Aboriginal Artists working in Aboriginal Art Centres (2002). He examines the commission breakdown for paintings sold and inserts these exploitative equations into trigonometry models he calls the 'Triangle of Sadness' (2002). This could be represented by the bold, red-lined triangle that is layered over the top of the text in *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, crossing the word 'Aboriginal' in two places, symbolising that Aboriginal artists are twice crossed in this dynamic. It is Bell's astute ability to critique even these celebrated social enterprises (2002) that makes 'his art an itchy rash on the Australian body politic.' (McClellan 2014:632)

Bell's use of colour and pattern in *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)* creates an aesthetic spectrum that does not account for the scathing political critique immanent in the text. The provocative statement 'ABORIGINAL ART It's A WHITE thing' speaks to how white control of the market, corroboration of authenticity, and appropriation of the motifs of Aboriginal art all serve to co-opt it into a device that sanitises our present; disguising the fact it is indeed a clear continuation of our colonial history.

References

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