

SHERMAN GALLERIES

16-20 Goodhope St, Paddington, Sydney NSW 2021



WOMENS' BUSINESS, CURATED BY TONY OLIVER June 2006

A blood-soaked Kimberley moon silhouettes some gum trunks that stand in front of the vast Wyndham horizon as I write these words. 'Something bad is coming,' Peggy Patrick told me several years ago as we witnessed a similarly eerie moon from the sandy banks of a gorge where we had decided to swag the night, having spent an emotional day visiting the Bedford Downs massacre site.

A few nights ago, I visited a friend in Kununurra who had recently lost his second son. Walking back to my hotel room, I saw the same menacing moon creeping up the gums before me. I am told that the newspapers in the cities are full, at present, of the troubles facing Aboriginal people across Australia. To those of us who live our lives in such places, this is not news but part of daily life in a human war zone. These are complex issues linked to years of shared European and Aboriginal history. One day that wave of history had to reach a critical mass and crash down. Menace remains everywhere.

The paintings in **Women's Business** show a strength and beauty that overwhelms me, in part because I know what these courageous women continue to bear. As the older artists will say: 'It was better in the old days when we were working on the stations. We had our country to walk on, and our kids were safe, and we could teach them law.' It is remarkable to hear the old people utter this, knowing the hardships they endured in the station system as a cheap labor force. Those times, too, were largely abstract in the eyes and ears of people in the great metropolises – and remain so. Hardship, for people here, has become a relative term.

It is now over thirty years since the station system collapsed. That means over thirty years of policies, which, in general, have failed Aboriginal people in the most startling ways. We have created urban bush ghettos – often through the well-intentioned policy of self-determination. In some of the most isolated and decimated communities in our country, governance is often purely symbolic, under the guise of the Aboriginal Corporations Act of 1971 – a truly outdated piece of legislation, open to abuse, whereby chairpersons and committee members are often illiterate and innumerate, having been provided little or no European education. We, as Australians, have a duty of care to these people – they remain unprotected and theirs is a human rights story.

In **Women's Business**, the younger women's graffiti works do not contain the 'traditional' content of the older women's paintings, yet nor are they pale imitations.

Behind the tags and the language there is the same strength and power. Their graffiti is tame in comparison to their lives: these women, along with their grandmothers, are my heroes. The content of their paintings covers the walls of Kimberley towns and communities. It is the only language that is screaming at the great Australian indifference and to all sides of politics – black and white, left and right, dry and wet.

We want the artists' 'dreaming stories' – a European fetish obsessed with the exotic and the spiritual – but not their humanity and their day-to-day reality as contemporary people. This exhibition, **Women's Business**, attempts to push the boundaries of our projected ideas and fantasies of what is 'traditional' and 'authentic' Aboriginal art. Such imposed definitions must blur if we are to come to the heart of our unconscious racism towards the other. If the younger women's graffiti paintings are judged as not 'authentic', are we denying the existence of these young women and their stories?

Aboriginal art has always transformed itself, interacting with the temporal, both natural and social. Aboriginal art has always been contemporary, as with art from places the world over. All the paintings in this exhibition speak visually for themselves and contain stories. The older women's 'traditional forms' are contemporary transformations from body to canvas; the younger women's paintings, contemporary transformations from ghetto wall to canvas.

Recently, The Kimberley Echo ran a front-page banner 'ENOUGH', in reference to the graffiti-ed walls of Kununurra and to the large numbers of youths and children walking the streets at night. The ensuing article failed to mention how grossly under-resourced the region is in regard to social and mental-health workers. It also ignored that not one local business, or government agency, would invest one dollar in a police youth-camp initiative for black and white kids. It is both ironic and heroic that the local police force work as unpaid and unacknowledged social workers. The night streets reflect the sorry state of home life for these youth – if they happen to have a home at all.

The moon has crept up high in the gum leaves that softly rustle in the night breeze. Here I am closer to East Timor than I am to Sydney – a mere seven hundred kilometers away to my west. Like the East Timorese, I live in a country that has been torn to pieces – the difference being that East Timor was acknowledged as an official war zone. Its human rights violations are recognised in the eyes of the world.

We do not have a statesman to give leadership or a nation that has the political will to liberate those who were once our unofficial slaves. Where is the Australian army? Where are the United Nations peacekeepers? The great Australian colonial silence is as menacing and disturbing as the painting, Kununurra Midnight Prowl. It is far easier to point our fingers towards China, Indonesia or the United States when we speak of human rights. We do not want to see the darker realities that sit alongside the dreaming, because it is too uncomfortable and its story too disturbing for our 'lucky country'.

Just now the phone has rung and I have been informed that a brother has murdered his younger brother in the long grass directly opposite the Jirrawun Arts office in Kununurra.

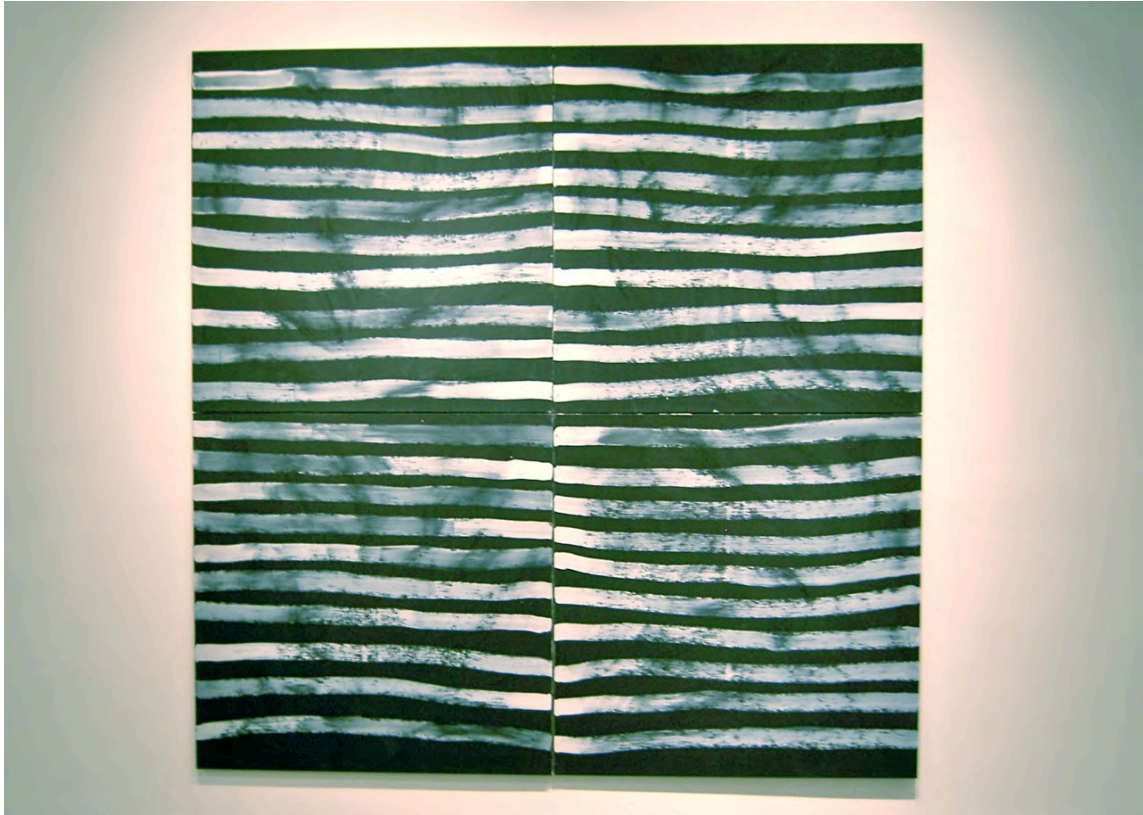
The blood red moon ...

Poor fella my country.

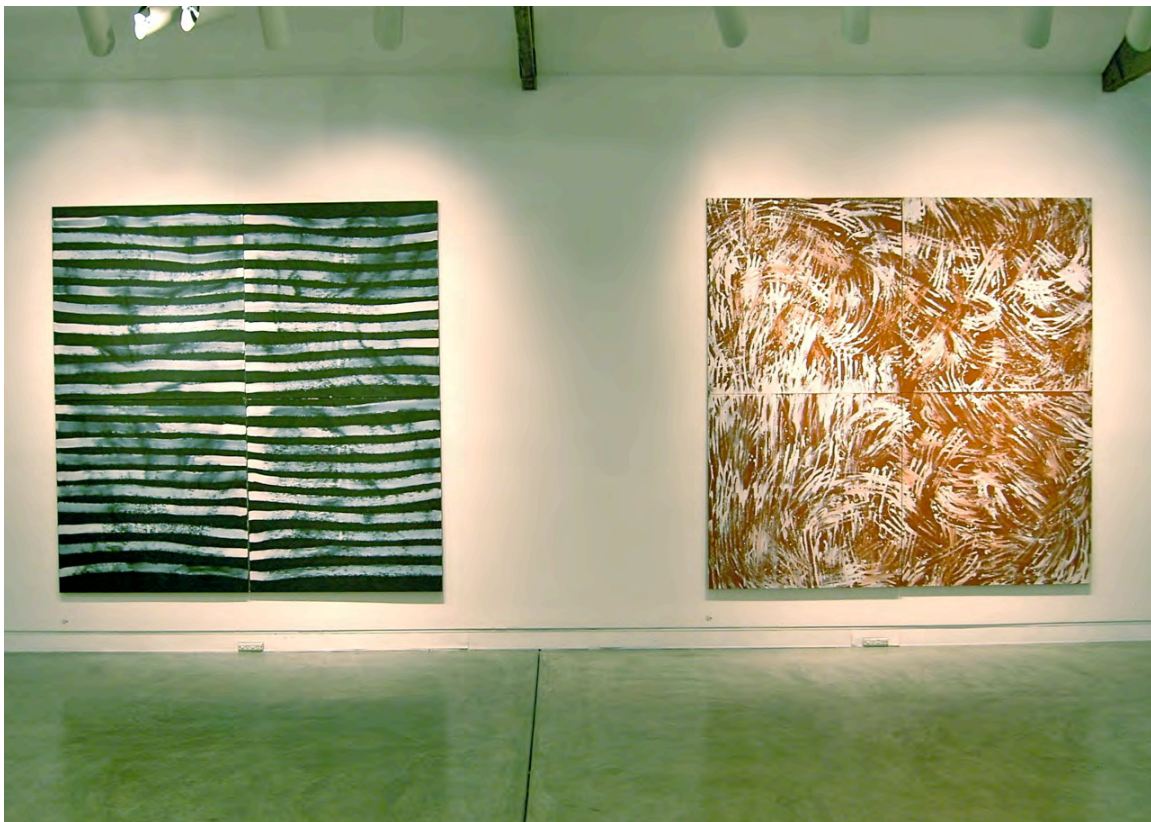
Tony Oliver
Artistic Director, Jirrawun Arts, Kununurra, WA

SHERMAN GALLERIES, SYDNEY

Women's Business: curated by TONY OLIVER, June 2006



Phyllis Thomas, *Gemerre (2)*, 2006 4 panels



Phyllis Thomas, *Gemerre (2)*, 2006 4 panels

Peggy Patrick, *Body Painting*, 2006 4 panels



Peggy Patrick, *Body Painting*, 2006 4 panels

Phyllis Thomas, *Gemerre*, 2006 4 panels



Phyllis Thomas, *Gemerre*, 2006 4 panels

Goody Barrett, *Linkirrel (White)*, 2006 8 panels



Goody Barrett, *Linkirrel (White)*, 2006 8 panels



Goody Barrett, *Linkirrel*, 2006 8 panels