

RICHARD DUNN THINKING PICTURES

31 OCTOBER - 28 NOVEMBER, 2026
GRACE COSSINGTON SMITH GALLERY

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COVER: Richard Dunn, detail of *Redbank Gorge, 1936 (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2002–2010, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm

ABBOTSLEIGH

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CONTENTS

4 **Introduction**
Peter McKay

8 Forward: Pictures and Shadows
Richard Dunn

10 **Plates**

26 **The Future is Unwritten: The Paintings After Namatjira**
Christina Balcombe Davidson

32 **The Future, Still Unwritten: An Afterword**
Christina Balcombe Davidson

INTRODUCTION:
PETER MCKAY

Richard Dunn was an artist with a deep awareness of the patterns and particulars of world history. He worked with a rigour that was grounded in playful good humour and an abiding curiosity. His inquiring mind sought to find explanations for his experiences and observations of an increasingly complicated and specialised world.

Interested in psychoanalysis and poetics as a student, he was determined to create an art that explored the experience of modern life, as opposed to perpetuating ailing traditions. As a Professor of Contemporary Visual Art, Richard cultivated a strategic detachment, always taking a step back from social, political, psychological or artistic conventions. Looking beyond ostensible explanations, he believed we might better perceive the contradictions and absurdities that can shape our lives, and perhaps lay the groundwork for meaningful social change.

In this way, Richard's elegant gestures—informed by the formal restraint of minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, the quotidian intricacy of pop art and his early studies in architecture—are more enquiring than they might first appear. Working against the cool irony and diarism that characterised much postmodern art, he sought a more critical and more sincere engagement with his audience.

Richard read and researched broadly. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) concretised for him the more slippery problems of language. Meaning, for Wittgenstein, arises through shared use, context and forms of life—suggesting to Richard that meaning is often provisional, limited or incomplete. Both Richard and Wittgenstein used the famous duck-rabbit problem to illustrate that meaning can shift while an object remains the same. He was also inspired by Wittgenstein's late interest in colour following Goethe: how to describe colours logically and geometrically, and the difficulties in identifying their subtle differences.

Through the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and the familiar fragment that 'you cannot step twice into the same river', he recognised that most things were much more complex than they appeared, and that transformation is a fundamental but often hidden aspect of our surroundings.

In the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, especially *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Richard perceived how modern institutions and their experts—such as prisons and wardens, hospitals and doctors—came to shape and enforce ideas of what is normal and acceptable, thus encouraging individuals to police themselves and others, lest they be disciplined.

Preoccupied with the culture that we inherit and create, perpetuate and consume—what it illuminates and what it conceals—Richard often sought images that harboured multiple readings and inherent complexity, as in his Scottish tartan *Names series* and *After Albert Namatjira series*.

Today, tartan can appear relatively uncomplicated: a souvenir of place or lost ancestry. To those versed in modern art, tartans can read as readymade abstractions, or a game of semiotics akin to Jasper Johns' flag paintings. Their history, however, is more tangled. Tartan was once locally produced in the Highlands and in this way tied to place, but it became politically charged once Highlanders were targeted by English authorities for wearing tartan after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Restrictions were repealed in 1782, but its use and symbolism had been disrupted. In the nineteenth century, tartans became increasingly codified as emblems of specific clans rather than place.

In painting the Macfarlane, McGregor, Eskine and Anderson tartans Richard acknowledged his Scottish grandparents, their passage to Australia, and the complex presence of the British in Scottish and Australian history. Richard remained mindful that many Scots, despite carrying memories of dispossession, displacement and suppression, participated in these same actions of colonial violence against Aboriginal people in Australia. In this context, Richard's tartans become filial and dislocated, even implicated: symbols of identity and its disruption.

Albert Namatjira remains one of Australia's most famous artists, yet he was first an Arrernte man, subject to racism and inequality in his own occupied land. Proud of his abilities and his Country, Namatjira mastered watercolour and transformed the Western tradition. Lively and evocative, his paintings accorded with the tastes of a conservative audience accustomed to landscape subjects. Such audiences read his work along the lines of the colonial project to capture the land through the Western convention of landscape painting and imagery.

Yet Namatjira's vision was also undoubtedly informed by his traditional knowledge of stories, designs and connections—a cultural dimension those same conservative audiences failed to appreciate, reading his Aboriginality out of his paintings. Richard recognised this and was intrigued by Namatjira's multilingualism: he was versed in Western Arrernte, English and German, and of course worked across visual languages too, giving his practice and thinking an extraordinarily fluid quality.

Captivated by the abstract qualities of a small group of jewel-like paintings of Redbank Gorge, Standley Chasm and Ormiston Gorge, which he saw in the survey exhibition *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira 1902–1959* at the National Gallery of Australia in 2002, Richard sought to work through these images, as artists often do. He wanted to understand them technically, intellectually and emotionally, asking: what does it mean, as a white settler Australian artist, to paint after Albert Namatjira while colonial injustice persists?

Richard saw a strong relationship with American Abstract Expressionists such as Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman, and this gave him an unexpected entry. Richard wasn't painting the landscape; he wanted to paint the paintings. Through this aesthetic investigation, he felt able to problematise Australia's colonial past. He could not offer answers, but he could provoke questions. Significantly, Richard stopped the series with the *Blasted Geometries* works when he felt that his own paintings and prints were turning back into landscapes and losing their abstract qualities, risking becoming derivative rather than investigative.

Richard recognised that how we see is never neutral: our perception is shaped by histories, interests, identities and inheritances. Meaning can and must be questioned and transformed, lest we find ourselves trapped within systems that have themselves become invisible.

Peter McKay is a curator, writer and lapsed artist with over two decades of experience at significant Australian art institutions. He was Head of Australian Art from 2018—25 and Curator, Contemporary Australian Art from 2011—18, at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (QAGOMA). He was Curator at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide (CACSA), from 2007—11 and a volunteer Co-Director of Downtown Art Space ARI, Adelaide, between 2007—09.



Albert Namatjira, *Redbank Gorge, 1936,* watercolour and gouache, 33.2 x 27 cm. Collection of the Ellis Family

FORWARD: PICTURES AND SHADOWS
RICHARD DUNN

Assembling these images—of paintings, photo-works, objects, and installations—I see the influence of the studio, with its disorder and space, music and silence. Here is my account of what arose in this place, from the coincidence of speculation and action. This is the idea of praxis, focused on the activity itself. For me, making art is a method of externalising my thoughts, picturing being in the world. This is my response to its social, economic, environmental and political dimensions, as well as the respite of contemplative mental processes and vision itself.

My thoughts can fill this space. Here, importantly, I can explore memories, events and experiences. Artmaking is intuitive. It's like thinking aloud, where the complexity of experiences can be reflected on in a way that may also resonate in others. So, art is also a social act. Although I propose specific situations, images, and configurations within my view, I manifest the profusion of thought, not the confines of an idea. To this end I take from existing images and abstract formulations, or spatial arrangements, or non-visual sources such as pieces of writing, music, the character or social life of disparate places to reveal or create new meanings.

In life, by choice and circumstance, we deal with the impact of a multiplicity of experiences. Art is similarly made up as one lives but at the same time responds to very different conditions. Donald Judd characterises this difference rather neatly: 'Art', he says 'must be as decisive as acts in life, hopefully more so, and is made despite the same acknowledged ignorance. But the assertions of art depend on more organization and attention than is usual in living'.[1]

I explore images metaphorically, finding analogies, stimulating reflection. Where one thing is placed in conjunction with another, I'm interested in how this changes the way we understand both. My inclination is to find surprise in this. If there is the temptation of repetition, my tendency is to approach a familiar idea from an unfamiliar position. I have since realised, this aligns with the fragmented formations of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin. It is a way of thinking and a form of language, this thinking in fragments. To go further, you could say we live in a vortex of fragments. But being wholly visual, art carries the potential for interpretation and connections in very different ways, such as in the example of film montage or collage techniques.

The works shown in this book reveal my curiosity to find new stimulations; to challenge myself, to find out what thoughts look like and to understand things differently. This reminds me of something Ernst Gombrich said in 1969 that has stayed with me: that art history is a history of action and reaction. This accounts for new art flouting conventions, or at least taking a wholly new direction. Gombrich meant within art, I mean to extend that idea to the way art engages with the world.

Even so, there are clear threads running throughout my practice and longstanding themes that allow me to retrace my steps, or reconsider what has been made. Rather than seeing what I produce as simply a collection of distinct artworks, they are, in my view, a multifaceted 'total artwork'.

I studied architecture (and briefly painting and sculpture) in Australia in the1960s, significantly influenced by Louis Kahn, but also very affected by the politics of the termination of Jørn Utzon as Sydney Opera House architect in 1966. I am the author, with the architect Douglas Gordon, of one house. At the same time, I made paintings, exhibiting mostly informal abstracts. Major influences on my openness to art in other forms were my experience with contemporary theatre through a university dramatic society (Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Brecht) and New Wave cinema (in particular, Godard, Truffaut and Varda). Together, these experiences, and pop's opening up of the image, had a cumulative impact on later work.

Although commencing in Australia, my artistic maturity began in Europe in the second half of the 1960s—my coming up for air—specifically in London and more peripherally in Paris and New York. My understanding expanded. Informed by disruptive art at the boundary of visual art practice after modernism: minimalism, or better 'reductive' art, the beginnings of conceptualism, or the situationists, all of which had a connection with work made earlier in the twentieth century: suprematism (Malevich, El Lissitzky, Popova and Rozanova), neoplasticism (Mondrian), abstract expressionism (Pollock and Newman), pop (Hamilton and Rosenquist) and dada (Duchamp). Each challenged the status and reception of artworks. Let's not underestimate the impact of new music, architecture and its spatial sense, the use of mathematics or just numbers, even the disruptive nature of contemporary art, such as Land Art and Fluxus.

Each place where I have lived or spent extended time has given me something quite precise. London early on was where I discovered how to think, then the positivity of New York suggested that anything is possible and art comes from a context, while Paris bore the weight of its context—and the complexities of life became clear. Scotland reveals the weight of the imperial centre and that the enlightenment is in the present tense, while in India it is the functionality of chaos and the cultural power of textiles that are evident. In Germany I understood the uncertain but significant meaning of 'consequence'. Australia? Understanding it is a work in progress.

This book commences towards the completion of my life-changing three years at the Royal College of Art, culminating in 1969 in large-scale non-representational paintings and a thesis on minimalism, not as non-objective art, but influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sigmund Freud's insights. Things can mean more than appearances suggest. I embarked on a process of personal discovery, seeking not a group to join, nor idioms to embrace, but a form of art in which I pursued 'meaning' on my own terms.

The Freudian philosopher Richard Wollheim, who gave the name 'minimalism' to the reductive tendency of twentieth-century art, presciently linked minimalism, pop and conceptual art by bracketing Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp, extending art beyond style or art movements.[2] This opened contemporary art beyond categories.

In the late 1960s, when I was faced with the increasingly reductive and broken trajectory of twentieth-century modernism, 'the death of painting' or the rediscovery of the monochrome, I was not tempted to retreat into past solutions. This period was a fertile beginning point, as it was for other contemporary artists who emerged at that time, particularly in Germany.

At that brief moment I could have been described as a kind of 'minimalist', yet that is as inaccurate as calling me 'postmodern' fifteen years later. Rather than some variant on 'conceptual artist', this book shows all my work as driven by internal thinking processes rather than visual models; 'idea art', you could say, where thinking is made concrete, externalised, but with an aesthetic character.

Blurred boundaries between different tendencies, as Wollheim perceived, or, to deliberately change direction, as Gombrich understood, extend the possibilities of what I do. This requires an embrace of complexity over the implied simplicity of minimalism, to be realised more like questions than answers.

Outside defined boundaries and canonical practices a new kind of practice became possible. One that is optimistic, heterogeneous and at odds with the certainties of style consistency that establish brand recognition or commodification. My interest was, and remains, more intimate; in the process of making art I seek to understand something of the world we inhabit, my place in it, and at the same time to give space to a spectator to reflect on their own perceptions. I direct my thinking in a particular way. A spectator can do the same. In a sense they can occupy the space of the artist in a way that

can be as much corporeal as visual. As Marcel Duchamp put it: 'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds their contribution to the creative act.'[3]

To map my practice is to discover an underlying framework built on a planar base of abstract/reflective painting yet conceived of as occupying a particular spatial context. Many refer to images derived from the flattened, abstract nature of a photograph; images that are themselves referents rather than literal representations. This openness to meanings, together with a heightened consciousness of the viewing experience in actual space, has led to directions beyond painting. This has been a consistent way of working for some sixty years.

But before all else, for me, the act of artmaking is fundamentally an internalised, uplifting, and life-affirming process, freed from an awareness of time's constraint.

1 Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (eds.), *Donald Judd Writings* (New York: Judd Foundation/David Zwirner Books, 2016).
2 Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', *Arts Magazine* (January 1965).
3 Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds.), *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London, 1975), pp. 138–140). This was from a talk given in Houston in 1957.



Richard Dunn, *Talipate, Western MacDonnell c.1945–53 (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 240 x 200 cm



Richard Dunn, *Redbank Gorge 1936 (after Albert Namatjira), small version*, 2015/16, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 82 cm



Richard Dunn, *Redbank Gorge, 1936 (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2002–2010, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm



Richard Dunn, *Quarta-tooma (Ormiston Gorge) 1939 (after Albert Namatjira) Blasted Geometries*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm



Richard Dunn, *Redbank Gorge, MacDonnell Ranges c.1936–37 (after Albert Namatjira) Blasted Geometries*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm



Redbank Gorge 1936 (after Albert Namatjira) Blasted Geometries, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm



Richard Dunn, *Standley Chasm c.1942–49 (after Albert Namatjira) Blasted Geometries*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 165 cm





Richard Dunn, *Quarta-tooma (Ormiston Gorge),1932 (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2011–2012, woodblock monoprint, 150 x 98 cm, and
Standley Chasm c.1942–49 (after Albert Namatjira), 2011–2012, woodblock monoprint, 150 x 98 cm





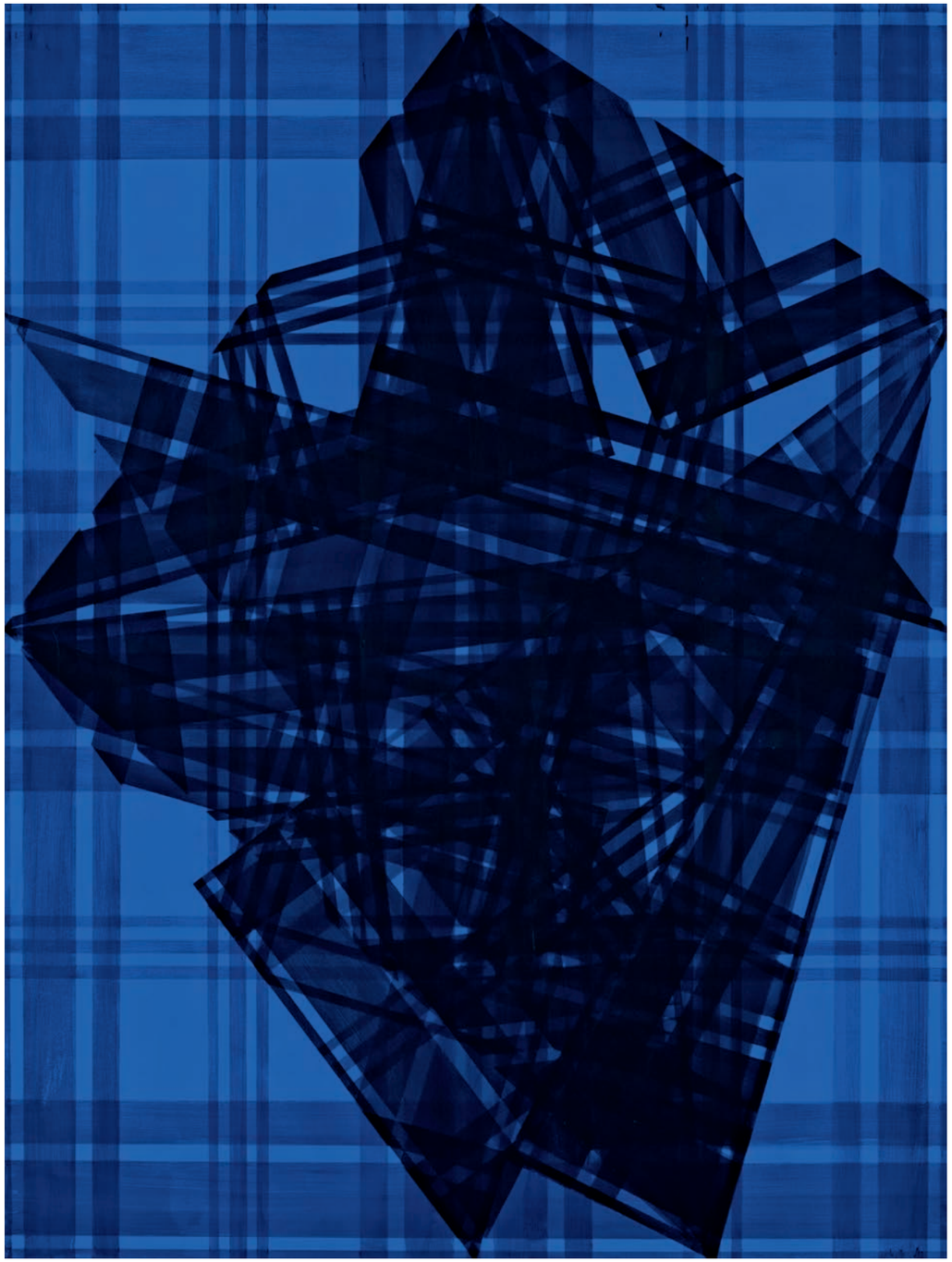
Richard Dunn, *Redbank Gorge 1936 (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2011–2012, woodblock monoprint, 150 x 98 cm, and
Redbank Gorge, MacDonnell Ranges, Northern Territory, c.1936/37 (after Albert Namatjira), 2011–2012, woodblock monoprint, 150 x 98 cm



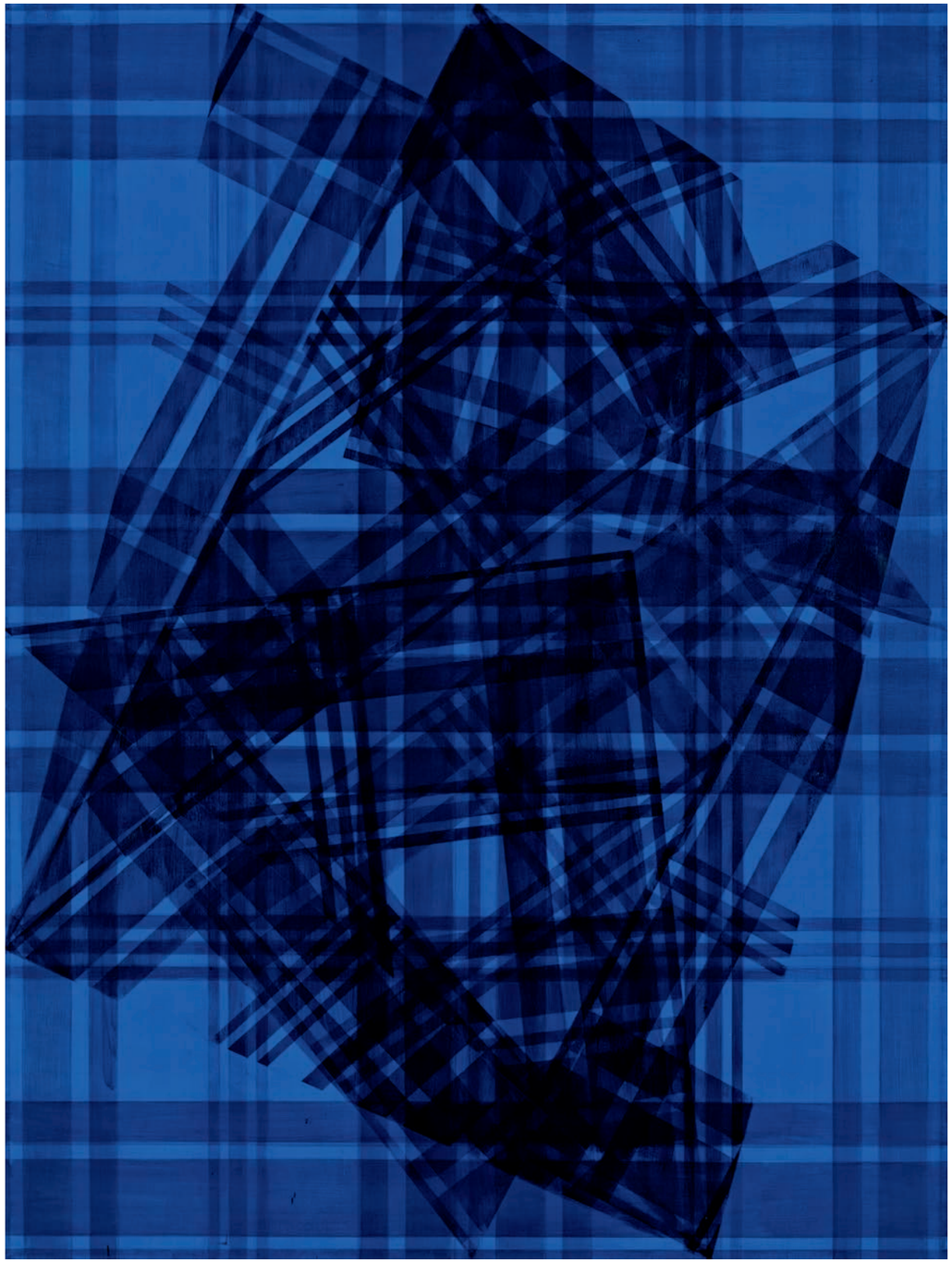
Richard Dunn, *Polychrome: Quarta-tooma (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 cm



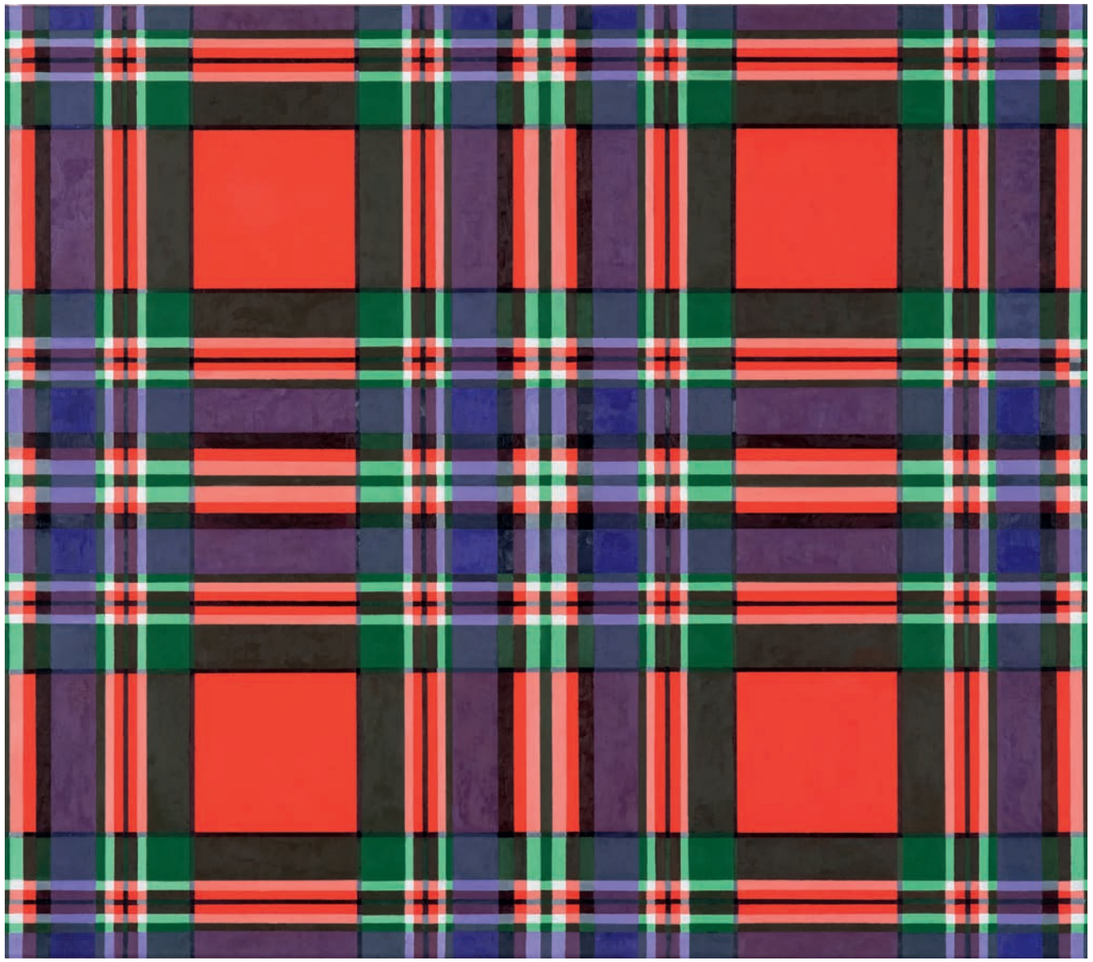
Richard Dunn, *Polychrome: Redbank Gorge (after Albert Namatjira)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 cm



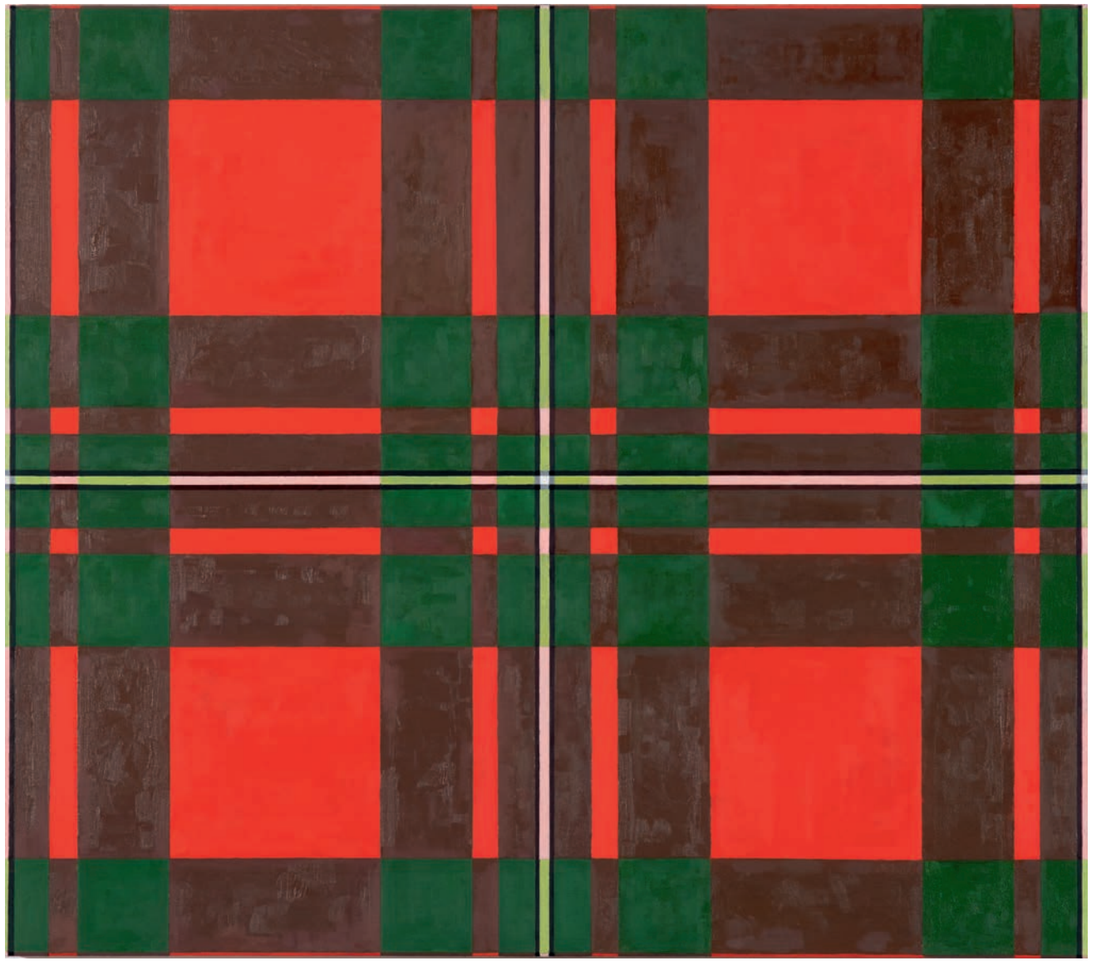
Richard Dunn, *Folding No. 1*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 135 cm



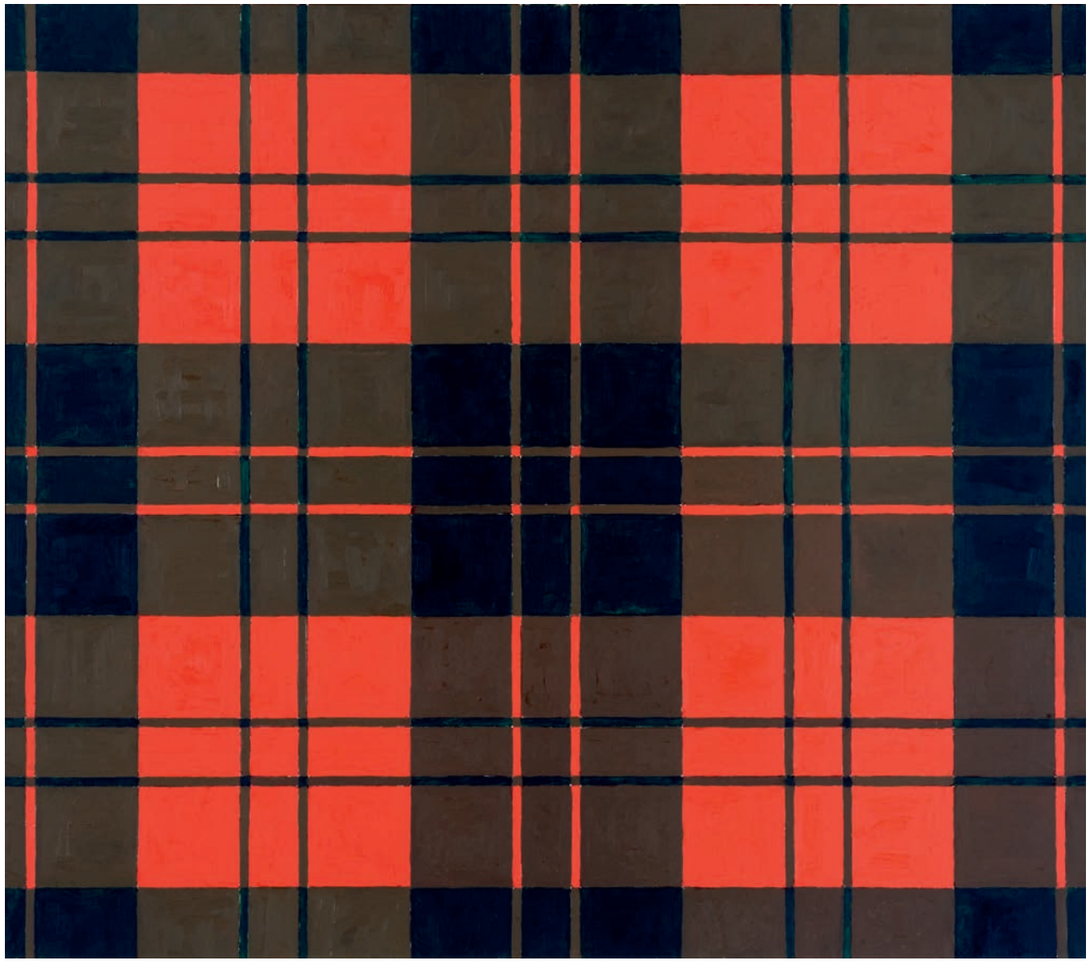
Richard Dunn, *Folding No. 2*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 135 cm



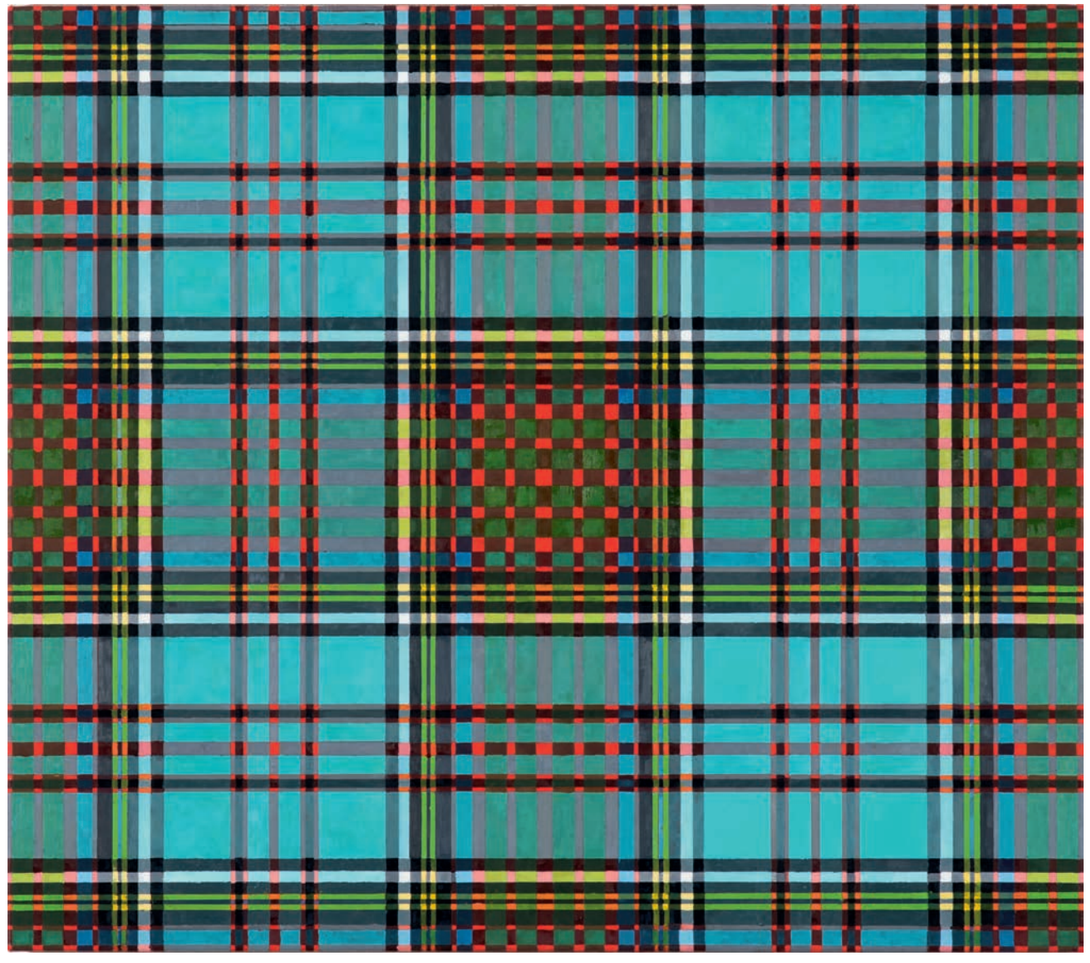
Richard Dunn, *Names No. 1 (Macfarlane)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 111.5 x 127 cm



Richard Dunn, *Names No. 2 (McGregor)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 111.5 x 127 cm



Richard Dunn, *Names No. 3 (Eskine)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 111.5 x 127 cm



Richard Dunn, *Names No. 4 (Anderson)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 111.5 x 127 cm

THE FUTURE IS UNWRITTEN: THE PAINTINGS AFTER NAMATJIRA

CHRISTINA BALCOMBE DAVIDSON

The past once destroyed never returns. The destruction of the past is perhaps the greatest of all crimes.
Today the presentation of what little of it remains ought to become almost an obsession.
We must put an end to the terrible uprootedness which European colonial methods always produce,
even under the least cruel aspects.
Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past.[1] Simone Weil

Richard Dunn's paintings 'after' the Western Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira (1902–1959) explore points of dialogue between Australian Aboriginal and settler artists.

All are titled after original watercolour paintings of gorges in the MacDonnell ranges near Alice Springs made by Albert Namatjira over the decade starting in the mid-1930s. While increased considerably in size and rendered in acrylic, Dunn's paintings draw heavily on Namatjira and the popular style of Western empirical landscape watercolour painting he adopted and transformed.[2]

Much of Dunn's painting has been abstract and, where figurative elements are incorporated, his works never function representationally as 'windows onto the world'. In the manner of minimalism and concept art, Dunn seeks to directly engage the viewer. 'Instead of viewing painting as a "language" or means of expression', he has said painting is approached 'as a demonstration of something that is emphatically visual and material', as the basis for externalising thought.[3]

Richard Dunn first saw Namatjira's gorge and gap watercolours in 2002 at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA).[4] The marked difference between these and the open landscapes provided him a portal to reassess Namatjira's work. However, for nearly two decades after 2002, while making his 'homages', Dunn's reference point was reproductions in the exhibition catalogue. In 2019, he visited Hermannsburg and the sites in the MacDonnell Ranges.

These gorge paintings represent a specific sub-set distinct from the classic Namatjira watercolours of bleached white Ghost Gums and rocky outcrops framing open vistas leading back towards distant hills. The gorge paintings are by contrast contained and containing.

Dunn's transcriptions closely follow Namatjira's originals. The distinctive bright colours of Namatjira's watercolours have close equivalents in these acrylic paintings. Flat layers of paint are blocked in with masking tape and applied by palette knife to rework and fix Namatjira's fluid blending of watercolour, pencil, and gouache on paper. These paintings overtly reveal their facture so the images are radically abstracted.

For Dunn, Namatjira's gorge paintings recalled the psychologically darker paintings of Clyfford Still (1904–1980), whose early paintings were influenced by rock formations in the Alberta Badlands, and brought to mind Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* (1880) and Edvard Munch's prints of the 1890s.

Areas of white frame the 'image' on the canvas, abutting it as the white page surrounds artworks in a catalogue, and spelling out that the reference is to a photographic reproduction, not a 'landscape'.

RICHARD DUNN

Through his early and diverse engagements with Aboriginal art and politics, Dunn was very aware of the realignment of Australian art as Indigenous artists challenged its various Western orientations. Returning to Australia in 1977 after more than a decade in Europe Richard Dunn was more European in his orientation. He was in general deeply sceptical of 'anything goes' artistic appropriationist strategies current in the 1980s and what he saw as the potential for co-opting Aboriginal artists within contemporary art.[5]

In 1975 Richard Dunn had filmed a video submission by architect Peter Myers to an Australian Senate hearing on Aboriginal housing and access to Country, *Room to Move*. And in 1981 he had participated in a symposium on the first-time inclusion of Indigenous/Papunya artists in a contemporary art exhibition.[6] In 1983, coincident with Suzanne Page's exhibition *D'un autre continent: l'Australie, le rêve et le réel* in Paris, he was present at the Franco-Australian Round Table with Aboriginal/Warlpiri participants and French anthropologists, including Claude Lévi-Strauss.[7]

In 2002, by selecting Namatjira—who made watercolours 'in the European manner'—as a source Dunn raised unresolved questions about shared artistic heritage in the time 'after Namatjira', tentatively positing: 'If one lives in Australia should it be possible to reference Aboriginal painting, as Aboriginal painting has referenced Western painting?'[8]

As a source, Namatjira's paintings become a means to enquire into 'something that is more abstract, an idea of a relationship between people and a relationship to place'.[9]

Dunn's 'tartan paintings' (begun in 1984 and continuing to the late 1990s) **[pp. 104–107]** respond to the cultural debates of the era and relationship of signs to place. In a context in which the morality and rights of appropriating Indigenous designs and cultural artifacts were aggressively debated—but often ignored—Dunn responded by referencing his own culturally contentious roots and heritage.

The configurations employed in his first tartan paintings were emblems of the clans of his grandparents.[10] He had 'permission' to use them by virtue of his clan ties. In those tartan paintings the grid-like colour distribution of the tartan fabric was interlaced with references to Piet Mondrian's embryonic modernism.[11] This use of clan designs suggests interesting comparisons with patterns and designs used by Yolngu clan artists, and with attendant land claims;[12] however Dunn's tartans posit no resting place for his diasporic identity.[13]

In paintings which emphasize their object status and materiality, the function of the tartan is both declarative and curtailed, serious and tongue-in-cheek. Dunn has remarked: 'These paintings are as much about tartan as Jasper Johns's "flag" is about the American flag.'[14] Yet Scots identity has a deep history that can be problematized in the tartan. For Dunn, in the diaspora, within a multiculture that highlights otherness, cultural complexity of Scotland—understood during his two decades of close engagement—reveals a multiculture harboured within a national conviction.

SIGHT

Namatjira became famous for his vibrant and highly proficient watercolour 'landscape' paintings rendered in the European manner. For settler Australians, their pictorial language was quite familiar. However, for Namatjira himself and the several hundred of his Western Arrernte countrymen and women who attended the 1934 showing of Rex Battarbee and John Gardner's watercolours of Arrernte Country at the Hermannsburg Mission schoolroom, the shock on seeing representations of their Country in a wholly new way cannot be overestimated.[15]

The early settler commentators, notably Battarbee and anthropologist Charles Mountford, attributed the enthusiasm of the Western Arrernte audience for the 1934 exhibition to the idea that they were 'experiencing the beauty of their landscape for the first time': a claim that seems unlikely, given that the Arrernte people had been the sole custodians of the Country since time immemorial and were so closely bound and emplaced with it. Today it seems more likely it was the capacity of these empirical paintings to 'bring Country to mind' that so absorbed the Western Arrernte audience. The images functioned as a kind of mnemonic, triggering recall of stories and internal states of connectedness to their Country which the violence of recent invasion had separated them from.[16]

The popular European acceptance and familiarity with this pictorial language contrasted with its initial reception in the Arrernte world where Namatjira's adoption of the

representational style marked the most radical departure from familiar visual lexicons.

Namatjira's adoption of a pictorial language, new to his people, added to rather than replaced his exercise of Arrernte visual language and the integrally connected Arrernte knowledge systems. His simultaneous command of traditional Arrernte symbolism and Western representation is documented by Mountford in his 1944 book, *The Art of Namatjira*, which reproduces a crayon drawing Namatjira made for Mountford demonstrating Arrernte symbolic forms representing his totem place and ancestral stories explaining the creation of the landscape.[17] A Western Arrernte man who grew up on the mission at Hermannsburg, Namatjira was initiated in tribal law and spoke his own Western Arrernte language as well as German and English.

Approaching Namatjira through the 'portal' of the gorge paintings, Richard Dunn throws light on a darker side to the great Arrernte artist's oeuvre. In the almost metaphysical stillness of the enclosed spaces of Namatjira's gorges re-figured in Dunn's paintings, a formidable disquiet emerges. We notice that the ancient gorges are unsettlingly devoid of human or even animal presence. A chasm opens between the shining bright vision of a classic Namatjira landscape and the real passage of history of the people whose country is being portrayed.

Diane Austin-Broos recounts the history of invasion of Western Arrernte territories from the 1860s and the displacement and loss of life that compelled Namatjira's people to settle at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission.[18] The anthropologist explores the enormous 'ontological shift' in the twentieth century involving a complete change of Western Arrernte 'world and being' as the horrendous confrontation between one sophisticated people and another was played out.

This shift, neither neat nor complete, was set in motion by the forced change from a hunter-gatherer life, 'which is kin-based and emplaced, to the encounter with a market economy with its bureaucratic state, cash and commodities'.[19] The greatest violence to Western Arrernte life, she argues, is the 'creeping destruction' of 'the complex knowledge system … whereby Western Arrernte invested value in place, gave each other identity, and maintained a regional society in a harsh environment'.[20]

Contemporary Western Arrernte painting continues to be informed by this knowledge system—'immersed in relatedness'—and the connection to its emplaced way of being is enlivened through the act of painting.[21]

AFTER NAMATJIRA

There are a number of different ways to read the titles of Dunn's paintings 'after Namatjira'. There is the unmistakable invocation of American artist Sherrie Levine and the foundational moment of 1980s postmodern appropriation. Levine's 1981 photographs *Untitled (After Edward Weston)* reproduced images by the famous photographer from catalogues without alteration: applying the strategy which Marcel Duchamp pioneered with the rectified readymades, of creating a 'new idea' for 'found' images by changing their title and context.

The designation (after Namatjira), along with the reproduction of catalogue titles, acknowledges Namatjira as the source for Dunn's work. More fundamentally, Dunn's titles invoke the concept of a period of time after Namatjira. And the NGA Namatjira retrospective, coinciding with the hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth, presented a strong case for re-reading his work.

Dunn's choice of Namatjira points to this landmark moment at the beginning of the Aboriginal art movement, and by implication to a new art historical period.[22] H. C. Coombs with notable optimism and prescience said in 1983 that Namatjira was 'no isolated accident in Aboriginal contemporary history' and he demonstrates that interaction between European and Indigenous Australian art traditions could produce 'a renaissance potentially as significant for Australian life as that which was launched upon Europe by the spread of "new knowledge" from Constantinople in the sixteenth century'.[23] In this era, of which we are still part, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian art and artists stand side by side radically changing the paradigm for understanding art and relationship to place in Australia; and the implications are still playing out.

THE PRESENT

With the gorge paintings (after Albert Namatjira) there is no imagined landscape to look through or into. We find, disturbingly, that Dunn's paintings aren't fundamentally about landscape, or, literally, Country. Like most of the other associations even the primary one with Namatjira's original watercolours depicting a specific and presumed culturally significant place won't hold still. Dunn's paintings seem to elude the specific substance to which they apparently refer. Dunn's images might be about relationship to 'place' in the abstract, but not to a particular place. Perhaps one could say instead that they are 'about' Namatjira and his watercolours, or this is the relationship they make, and Dunn's transcriptions are not representational 'landscapes', but point to something deeper.

In the case of Namatjira this 'something' is relationship to Country, or even being a Man. For Dunn, differently, it's about how settler colonialists occupy a place 'owned'. That is to say, known in a fundamental way by others ('possessed' by historical emplacement and relatedness) affecting what relationships are possible. And this is prefigured by his tartan works. Country is starkly foregrounded as a subject in these paintings, by its absence in a sense. What is revealed is how mainstream audiences have generally viewed Namatjira's works as landscapes (empirical vistas or views). Yet for Namatjira and the Western Arrernte it could never be thus.

Arrernte painter Wenton Rubuntja (1923–2005) explained: 'We're not like whitefellas who can take a photograph and say what pretty country it is; we've got the song to sing for that country. The country has got sacred sites. That stone, that mountain has got Dreaming'.[24] The means might have come 'out from the whitefella hand' but,

> …when whitefellas look at Aboriginal country and paint it, they see it differently, and they see the land and paint it exactly as it is. When Aboriginal people look at the country this is what happens: this is really the country, and there is an important story in the rocks and the rivers. They follow the dreaming history story as they paint …[25]

Traditionally educated Indigenous people tend to talk about the world in terms of their connection to Country; as embodied in story, movement, patterns, designs, objects, song, and ceremony. Driving through Country involves recalling ancestral stories and knowledge of particular places, their meanings and how people are bound to them. Driving through others' Country, where the custodians are unknown or 'finished-up', may lead to lamentations and wondering about how alienating it is not to know those stories. When settler Australians approach unfamiliar paintings, 'we' may consider style, influences, biography, contexts and so forth. We can conjecture that traditionally educated Indigenous people will likely first read whose Country it is, by drawing on their knowledge of the inherited patterns, designs, and stories. This is a crucial perception focused on the relationships: of people to Country, to creation and Alcheringa (Dreamtime) stories that encompass the foundational understanding of a place and how people know and belong to it.

The deep reassessment of Namatjira, prompted by the NGA exhibition and curator Brenda Croft's catalogue essay, and the ABC radio programme based on it, is the point at which Dunn commences his work. These were essential for new interpretations of Namatjira. Jenny Green observed that 'almost without exception the comment on and criticism of Namatjira's life and work is by non-Aboriginals. What is missing from the story is how Aboriginal people themselves view the life of Namatjira and the tradition of landscape painting'.[26] Now we ask, as did Richard Dunn, how could Namatjira's work be other than about Country? But what constitutes the Indigenous knowledge of Namatjira's Country, as contained in his watercolours, is not known to most audiences. Hence in the non-Indigenous world his landscape is a kind of void: an empty space signifying that area 'beyond the settler imagining' as Nicholas Thomas puts it.[27]

Dunn's paintings starkly remind us of how culturally and educationally relative perceptions inform how we read and construct meaning into art. As anthropologist of art Howard Morphy observes:

> It is a conceit of a particularly narrow band of Western art theory and practice that the appreciation and production of art has nothing to do with knowledge of its particular art history. For Indigenous art to be seen on equal terms, it requires that the viewer have some access to its history and significance.[28]

Yet it is exactly in an area of uncertainty that worthwhile perceptions may arise from different ways of picturing. The issues of cultural frameworks and information viewers have to read into images are identical for artists like Namatjira working in a Western style or artists like the early Papunya painters employing a more traditional style. To understand deeper aspects of meaning requires access to cultural frameworks in an act of learning, to discover different reference points and conventions beyond the expected.

For intercultural conversation and 'reconciliation' in Australia it seems obvious that we must start by knowing that we don't know, and by listening—something that traditional Indigenous education is said to stress. Namatjira learnt our language, but how much have we, in Australia, learnt his? Dunn's pictures are part of this learning. They make me think about the 'space beyond the settler imagining', the importance of recognizing that it exists and is not entirely beyond our capacity to learn.

Edited and revised 2023 from Christina Balcombe Davidson, 'The Future is Unwritten: Richard Dunn's Paintings After Namatjira', in Simon Klose (ed.), *Richard Dunn: Four Paintings After Albert Namatjira* (Benalla: Benalla Art Gallery and Moree Plains Art Gallery, 2011).

1 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 51.
2 Richard Dunn's 'after Namatjira' works, commenced in 2002, comprise works completed between 2010 and 2018, of which there are fourteen paintings and nine monoprint/woodblocks.
3 Stian Grøgaard, 'Richard Dunn: Complexity and Signature Style', in Stian Grøgaard (author), George Morgenstern (trans.), *The Restless Object: Twelve Conversations on Contemporary Art* (Oslo: Unipax, 2001), p. 112.
4 Alison French, *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira, 1902–1959*, catalogue (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2002).
5 Conversation with Richard Dunn, 17 March 2011.
6 Symposium at the Power Institute, University of Sydney with Bernice Murphy, curator, *Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981.
7 See Richard Dunn, 'Other Than What', and Introduction to 'The Dream and the Reality: Sketches from Paris', *Art-Network*, no.13 (Sydney, 1984), also quoted in Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998); Dunn participated in a symposium on Aboriginal/Papunya artists as contemporary artists, Power Institute, The University of Sydney, with Bernice Murphy, curator, *Australian Perspecta*, (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981), and was a board member of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association, 1987–1991.
8 Conversation with Richard Dunn, 17 March 2011.
9 Richard Dunn, correspondence with author, 12 December 2010.
10 Observation by Graham Coulter-Smith 'Richard Dunn's Strategy of Parts: From Minimalism to Postmodernism', in *Richard Dunn: Selected Writings 1978–1994* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Gallery, 1994), p. 29.
11 Dunn utilized the five paintings in Mondrian's 'blokje' series to make the Tartan paintings.
12 For an introduction to the use of clan designs in Yolngu art and geometric patterns employed see Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1988), pp. 149–159.
13 Grøgaard, 'Richard Dunn: Complexity and Signature Style', pp. 117–118.
14 Ibid., p. 117.
15 Rex Battarbee (1893–1973) first explored Central Australia with John A. Gardner (1906–1987) in 1932. In 1934 he won the Melbourne Centenary Prize for best watercolour, depicting the MacDonnell Ranges. Subsequently he focused on Hermannsburg and the area around the Finke River Aboriginal Mission, where he and Gardner held an exhibition in 1934.
16 See Jenny Green, 'Country in Mind: The continuing tradition of landscape painting', in Jane Hardy, J. V. S Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw (eds.), *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1992), and
Rex Battarbee and T. G. H. Strehlow, *Rex Battarbee: Artists and Founder of the Aboriginal Art Movement in Central Australia* (Sydney: The Legend Press, 1956); Rex and Bernice Battarbee, *Modern Aboriginal Paintings* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1971); and Charles Mountford, *The Art of Namatjir*a (Melbourne: Bread and Cheers Club, 1944).
17 Mountford, *The Art of Namatjira*, pp. 74–79.
18 Diane Austin-Broos, *Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past: Invasion, Violence and Imagination in Indigenous Central Australia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
19 Ibid., p. 4.
20 Ibid., p. 127.
21 Ibid., p. 17.
22 Brenda Croft, 'Albert's Gift', in Alison French (ed.), *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira, 1902–1959* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2002). NGA curator Croft forcefully argues that Albert Namatjira can be seen as the founder of the Aboriginal Art Movement.
23 H. C. Coombs made optimistic predictions of the wide effect of Indigenous art in Nadine Amadio, *Albert Namatjira: The Life and Work of an Australian Painter* (Melbourne: Macmillan,1986), p. vii.
24 Green, 'Country in Mind', pp. 288–299.
25 Ibid., p. 290.
26 Ibid., p. 285. See also 'Albert's Gift', *AWAYE!* (ABC Radio National, 9 and 29 September 2006).
27 Nicholas Thomas, *Indigenous Art: Colonial Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
28 Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross Cultural Categories* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), p. 185.

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THE FUTURE, STILL UNWRITTEN: AN AFTERWORD
CHRISTINA BALCOMBE DAVIDSON

The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess, and we possess no other life, no other sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*[1]

I am sitting at my desk in Darwin in Dalirrgang, the Larrakia season also known as the build-up. The garden is green but still dry, the days are hot, and we are waiting for the big rains. On my screen is an installation shot of Richard Dunn's monumental *Standley Chasm c.1942–49 (after Albert Namatjira)* at the Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, hanging beside Namatjira's small watercolour of the same gorge. At the Grace Cossington Smith Gallery in Sydney, Dunn's *Red Bank Gorge 1936 (after Albert Namatjira)* is similarly displayed beside the Namatjira on which it is based. These pairings picture a proposition: Australian art grounded in a tradition of Indigenous art.

My essay in this catalogue considered several ways to read Dunn's title 'after Namatjira': as homage, as postmodern appropriation, as an acknowledgement of a source. Now, fifteen years after the first version of this essay and after Richard Dunn's passing, one reading comes to the fore for me. 'After Namatjira' marks a period: the time following the birth of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement, a new era in Australian art in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous art hang side by side.

Namatjira is the founding figure of the Aboriginal art movement, which flourished in the self-determination era of the 1970s and 1980s, with a cultural renaissance and rebirth of traditional Indigenous knowledge. Across northern and central Australia, the Aboriginal-led homelands movement saw people return to live on their ancestral Country, revive language and ceremony, and build their own organisations. That era laid the foundations for the more than 100 remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled art and culture centres that, together with urban artists, sustain the art movement today. The same era built community-controlled health, legal and other service sectors, which the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (July 2020) recognises as an act of self-determination which delivers better results for life outcomes.

In art, the results of this renaissance are everywhere. Indigenous art hangs in the contemporary galleries of every major Australian art institution. A mosaic of Michael Nelson Jagamara's design is set into the forecourt of Parliament House, and Indigenous art is prominent in its interior halls. Indigenous art is now Australia's most visible and acclaimed art internationally, and it has changed not only Australian art but also how we think about living together in this country and understand its cultural heritage.

Richard Dunn's generation of artists thought hard about their European inheritance, about place and provincialism, and about how non-Indigenous artists might engage with Indigenous art. In 2011 he asked me: 'If one lives in Australia should it be possible to reference Aboriginal painting, as Aboriginal painting has referenced Western painting?' His paintings after Namatjira don't answer that question. They keep it open, in public, at a large scale.

That openness matters now. The referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was defeated in 2023, and in 2026 there are prominent political calls to abolish Indigenous-specific services and wind back Indigenous rights. In this context, Richard Dunn's paintings 'after Namatjira' take Aboriginal art seriously as a source, and in doing so acknowledge that this country's history did not begin in 1788.

Richard Dunn was a teacher, and it is fitting that this exhibition takes place in a school. His pictures show one way of taking what the past has stored up and creating it anew.

Christina Balcombe Davidson, 2026

1 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 51.

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