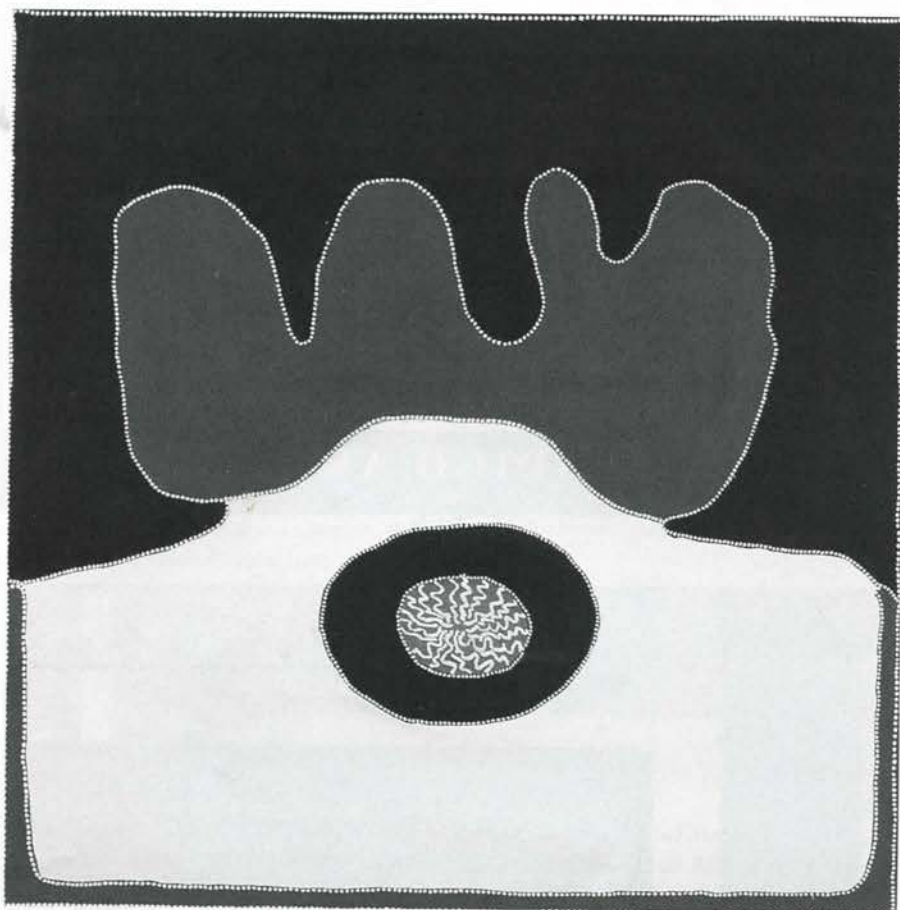


Two laws... One big spirit

Rusty Peters & Peter Adsett

SUZANNE SPUNNER



Rusty Peters, *The place where I was born, 2000, natural ochre on linen. Photo courtesy of 24 Hr Art*

‘Painting has its own law... so I’m painting about painting... which is obviously a modernist idea... What underpins this is the meeting of black and white... I was trying to eliminate the figure on ground relationship... So what comes first white on black or black on white’ Peter Adsett.

‘I make my country and tell him what it mean, that painting. I look at his painting and ask him ‘What country that?’ But he got different way. ‘What that painting mean?’ I say where that place?’ (laughter)... That how we work together. We want to find out black and white together — that real good’ Rusty Peters.⁴

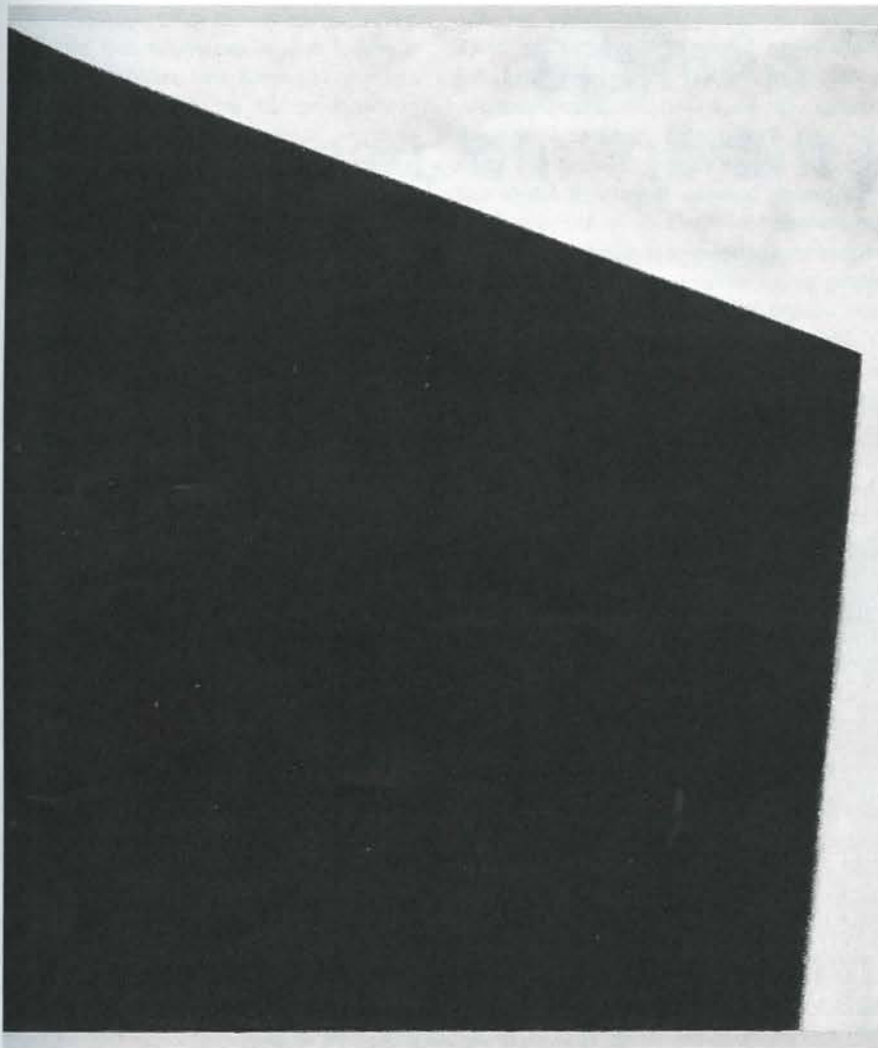
Two laws... One big spirit is a suite of fourteen paintings by Rusty Peters a senior Gidja man from the East Kimberley and Peter Adsett a New Zealand born artist who now lives at Humpty Doo south east of Darwin. Peters is a tall, grave, rangey ex stockman who grew up on Springvale Station, and has come to painting late in life, Adsett is a fair-haired boyish, gregarious painter who grew himself up in the footsteps of Colin Mc Mahon and has found the heart of his art in the Northern Territory. Together they are an exemplar of contrasts but behave like father and son, keeping their distance but always aware of the other, and proud of each other, looking out for one another.

Adsett teaches painting at NTU and over the last few years a close relationship has developed between the School of Fine Arts and the community of artists at Crocodile Hole where Peters was painting. That led to Peters coming to NTU as Artist-in-Residence where he saw Adsett painting. They watched each others work at NTU and during painting camps at Croc Hole. Melbourne gallery owner and dealer, William Mora represents them both and Mora saw something in between their works and suggested they ought to paint together, alongside. Adsett had just completed his *Waterhole Series* and Peters was working on *Frog Consciousness* and an idea he called the *water brain*. There was a reflection, a glimmer of connection which Mora and Tony Oliver the Art Advisor at Croc Hole recognised. They thought there could be something in it, something big, something to submit to the Venice Biennale. Time passed, the painting continued separately and then Peters spoke to Adsett and said ‘Hey, let’s do it! one day.’ And they did.

This was to be a painting camp and the rules were specified: fourteen paintings, seven each, seven pairs of squares and rectangles, three colours only — black, white and red, painted in sequence, no going back, going over or retouching, painting what each artist knew best, painting each after they had seen the other’s previous work. Neither a collaboration or a competition, a structured response, a formal conversation that became a Socratic dialogue about the truth of each man’s art.

Before the painting began, there was business to negotiate and they spent a week talking and then over Easter this year the paintings were executed at Humpty Doo. They existed on kangaroo and tea, painted and slept and dreamt the next painting for fourteen days straight. They said it was intense.

‘I paint my own way first and he paint his own way after me... He was painting I didn’t go and look... only after when he had finished. I look at his painting and think about it my way. I didn’t copy and he didn’t copy but we looking at each other but



Peter Adsett, Painting #8. 2000, acrylic on linen. Photo courtesy of 24 Hr Art.

making it our own way' Rusty Peters'

Peters painted on the ground under a tree using ochres, Adsett painted on his verandah using acrylics. When they paint, Peters is envisaging the wall of a rock shelter, Adsett a white-wall. Peters had to abandon a favourite yellow ochre, but mixed his ochres and got grey as a fourth colour, Adsett who never mixes acrylics nor actually uses black made his black from layers of red and green, retaining his usual 'black' and white palette.

As the elder Peters led off with his *The place I was born* where life seems to come from the centre, the eye, the brain, the rockhole of white squiggles on red ochre ringed with black. Adsett's response is an almost black square just slipping off or creeping over a white square, so that the white wall bleeds into the painting as if the whiteness is in retreat, on the back foot. Peters responds with an egalitarian gesture, a white ground and two snake like arms raised, one black, one red, with four streaming ribands from each alternating red and black, alternating behind and in front and in the centre a clear white space enclosed but not closed. Adsett replies acknowledging Peters and referring back to his first work; black and

white are almost equal, the black is still reluctant to fill its half but there is no doubt about the intentionality of the white, it's



Closing ceremony, a massacre Coroborree performed by the Nemunwaklin Aboriginal Dance Corporation from Bow River, WA dancing in front of Rusty Peters' and Peter Adsett's paintings.

asserting itself.

By the halfway point, in painting No.7 Peters is naming it *Different languages* and the composition of large dots, pools of red and black on a white ground seems to refer to the dialogue between the artists.

In looking at each artists work as two separate sequences one sees another process happening, the development of two monologues. Peters seems to work from a deep symmetry, shapes and colours are balanced, as if one half is a almost a mirror or a reflection of the other. Adsett, throughout the series is adjusting the black and white on a beam balance; by *Painting 10* the whiteness is heavy, falling on blackness like a heavy object in a shallow viscous pool, the surface tension pushing the black up around the three edges. In *No 12* the tension is held just so because of the counterpoise in the single black bar almost bisecting the white. *Painting No 14* reaches an equilibrium poised on the black edges, the 'inner' shorter edges are frayed and the 'outer' longer edges are more sharply defined.

How can one talk about paintings that seem to talk to each other across the gap of the wall? I find myself drawn to narrating a story of the black and the white paint, as if they are creator spirits themselves.

The issue is abstraction but it is grounded abstraction. Peters' work is always about intimately known places, particular events drawn from his life, his knowledge and the stories he was told by his grandfather, yet it is always abstract and symbolic, it's flat and two dimensional but the lines are never straight however the edges between colours are sharp, defined by white dotting. Adsett's work is about spiritual states, states of being, it never illustrates locale but calls up

particular places, his lines are straight and apparently clean (in these paintings there are no curved lines at all) but his edges are always blurry and burning where the layers of discrete colours are just apparent and there is always density and volume.

Just as one might wonder about figure and ground which comes first, you might also wonder which takes precedence the literal or the metaphoric. Ultimately the binary oppositions resolve by being held on the edge of dissolving. The figure is in the ground, the ground is embodied just as the land and the self are indivisible in Aboriginal art, where the act of painting country brings law, land and selfhood together. The exhibition invites meditation and hung in pendants of seven pairs of paintings the gallery space is formalised and sacralised by their palpable power.

Two laws... One big spirit was chosen by Cath Bowdler, Director of 24 HR ART as the centrepiece of their exhibition program. It will be toured by ARTBACK Nets NT through Northern Australia and the Kimberley and then nationally by NETS Australia. It was a rare privilege to see it in Darwin first at 24 HR ART in the presence of the artists, their countrymen and peers and graced by both an Opening and Closing ceremony.

At the Opening Koolpinyah Richard

Barnes of the Larrakia spoke of the relationship between Bilawarra, the black cockatoo from the Parap area and the Arkngar, the Black Cockatoo from Garamilla, the Cox Peninsula area and Artback Director, Denise Officer, retailed the close relationship between Peters and Adsett and how when Rusty comes to Humpty Doo, snakes invariably appear which she thought fitting as the snake is the dreaming for the area around the Argyle Mine near Croc Hole.

The closing ceremony took place the day after the announcement of the NATSIAA and the Neminuwarlin Dance Group(2) performed a precis of the Massacre Story they had presented in full the night before at the awards ceremony. The artists from Crocodile Hole have recently established Jirrawun Aboriginal Art at the Jururlinybany Community (Bow River Station) and the artists, Rusty Peters, Paddy Bedford, Freddy Timms, Phyllis Thomas(3) and Goodie Barrett have been engaged in making a series of massacre paintings (4) related to historical events that occurred on the stations where they were grown up. In the preceding months, massacre stories have been told and painful memories brought to light and the dance was made along with its requisite artefacts to mark and share that pain. It was an honour to be allowed to witness this terrible story with the community and the performance drew

tears from many of us watching. Again one is overwhelmed by the events that happened and the big spirit that enables Aboriginal people to make art from such dreadful histories. Words like sorry and reconciliation seem small by comparison, but ever more imperative.

- 1 *Artists Statements from Catalogue: Two laws... One big spirit* published 24 HR ART, Darwin NT, 2000
- 2 *The Neminuwarlin Dance Group from Juvurlinybany Community- Bow River Station* were sponsored by Argyle Diamonds to perform at the Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards
- 3 *The escape* by Phyllis Thomas, a massacre painting was exhibited in the NATSIAA.
- 4 *The series entitled 'Blood on the Spinifex'* was to be exhibited at the Olympics Arts Festival.



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