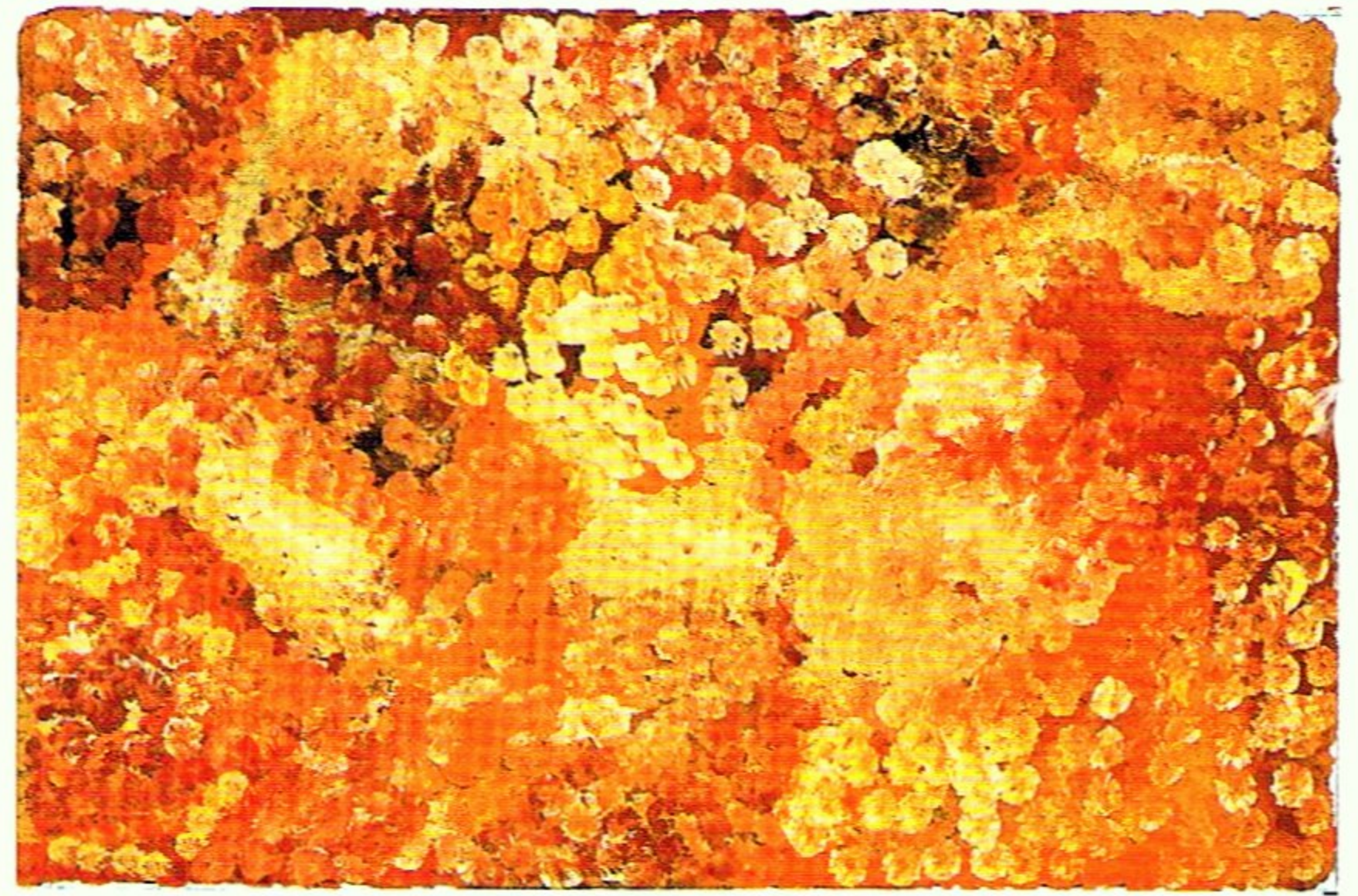


Museum Piece to Minimalist Cool

Contemporary Aboriginal Art & Modernist Expression

JANE RAFFAN



ABOVE: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Desert flowers)*, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 91.5 x 60.5 cm. © Emily Kame Kngwarreye, 1992/Licensed by VISCOPY Sydney 2002

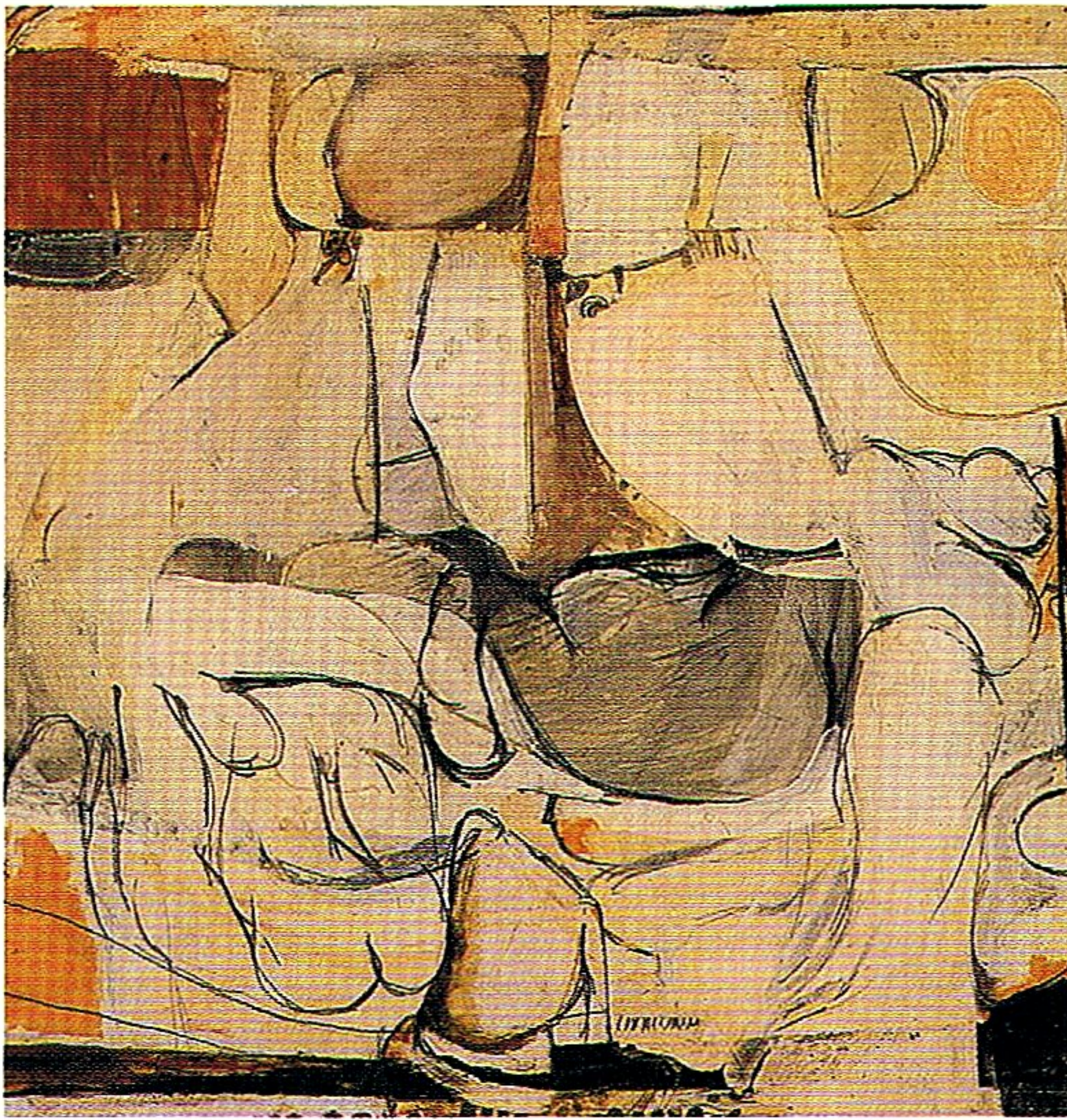
LEFT: John Olsen, *Desert Flower*, 1979, oil on canvas on board, 45 x 29.5 cm. © John Olsen, 1979/Licensed by VISCOPY Sydney 2002

Since the birth of Modernism, the idea of the Primitive has influenced the creative output of artists, architects and designers alike. Most apparent in the visual arts, photographs of the master artist's studios from the early twentieth century document the presence of *l'art premier*—indigenous art—from Africa and Polynesia, among the works of such greats as Picasso, Matisse and Gauguin.

The fascination for this realm holds true today, although the audience is broader due chiefly to the ease of twentieth century travel enabling mass exploration. Exotic places of the European nineteenth century imagination—the 'dark continents' of Africa and South America, and the 'earthly paradises' of the South Seas—were exposed to a truly international public, and were shown to be inhabited by people with histories and cultures as sophisticated and complex as their own.

The response to Australia's indigenous people and their art has travelled a similar pathway through antipodean twentieth century history. The European model influenced early conceptions of Australian indigenous peoples, and the boomerang, shield and spear dominated public displays of Aboriginal art. From today's perspective, however, Aboriginal art occupies a special place in the re-evaluation of contemporary art practice. Dating to 1970s, the modern output of indigenous artists offers an aesthetic that fuses a visual dynamism with a powerful connection to the primal.

Expressions of this art are as diverse as the peoples who produce it. Paintings on canvas and works on paper range from a hard-edged, abstract and colourful aesthetic, commonly found in work from the central and western desert communities, to the earthy, highly stylised, map-like paintings from the Kimberley region



Brett Whiteley, *Untitled (White Abstract)*, 1961, oil, charcoal and collage on composition board, 65 x 63 cm

in the Northern Territory. In some of these communities artists are also now experimenting with new media. In the desert, there is an emerging practice of translating ceremonial iconography into sculptural forms, while painters from Arnhem Land, some of whom have long decorated carved items, and who continue to depict a range of imagery on the highly tactile surfaces of bark, are now exploiting the use of natural pigments on canvas and paper to new effects.

This unique combination—of an art with a varied and dynamic aesthetic with living links to traditional spiritual practice—has proved appealing to cultural institutions, private collectors and interior designers alike. Aboriginal art now occupies a unique place on the world market, quite unlike the art produced by other indigenous peoples. Overseas collectors have long maintained an interest in Aboriginal material culture, although this interest has been formed largely through anthropological imperatives. This is borne out by the fact that most offshore purchases have been of artefacts and bark paintings. The international appreciation for contemporary Aboriginal art has been cemented only over the last ten years with Aboriginal art's inclusion in major contemporary art exhibitions and commercial art fairs, such as ARCO in Spain and the Venice Biennale.¹

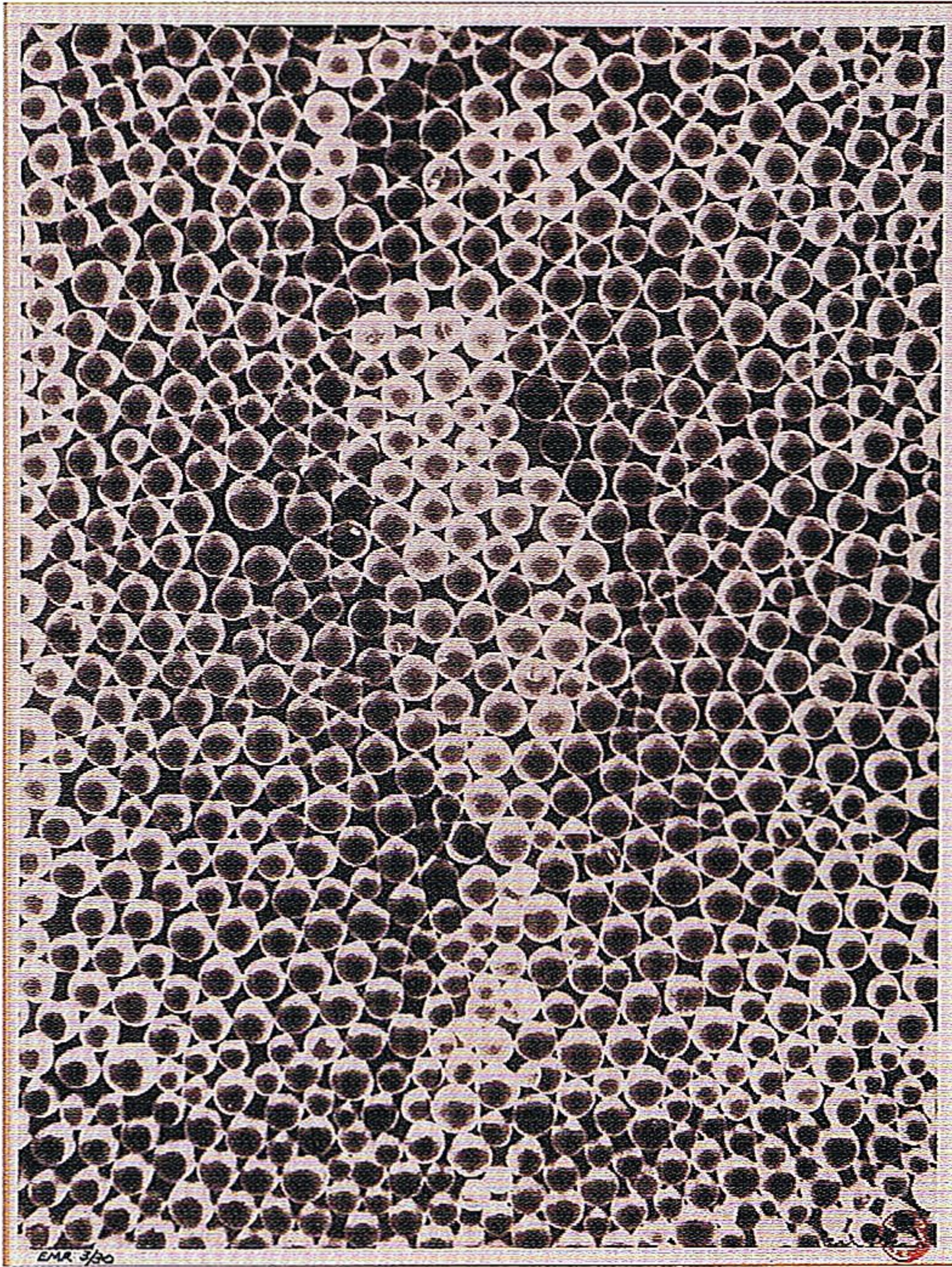
Makinti Napanangka, *Designs associated with the travels of Kungka Kungka*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 91 x 91 cm



The re-positioning of Aboriginal art from within musty museum cases onto the white walls of galleries has not, however, been universally accepted. Resistance to the idea that Aboriginal art is a genuine contemporary movement has been voiced in international public forums, most spectacularly in 1994, when Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi was rejected from the Art Cologne fair on the grounds that the selection was folk art. Pizzi fought the selectors and eventually gained admittance to the fair, trouncing the ethnocentric notion of Aboriginal art in the world's press along the way.²

This change in attitude has been reflected in the local auction market for Aboriginal art. In the early 1990s, less than 10 percent of items on offer sold to overseas collectors, and most of this material sold to buyers interested in the works for their ethnographic and anthropological value. This percentage increased by 1997 to around 40 percent and topped the 60 percent mark in 2000. Alongside this growth the demographic of buyers has shifted, with many more sales being reported to large private art collections and public institutions.³ While the contemporary art market has expanded considerably over the last five years, Aboriginal art is now reported by local art market professionals as comprising 20 percent of the country's most collectable artists.⁴

The reasons for this shift are manifold but at its most simple, the range of work available offers imagery to satisfy the demands of the seasoned collector or to stimulate the



ABOVE: Man Ray, *Untitled*, 1930,
gelatin silver photograph, 37 x 27.8 cm

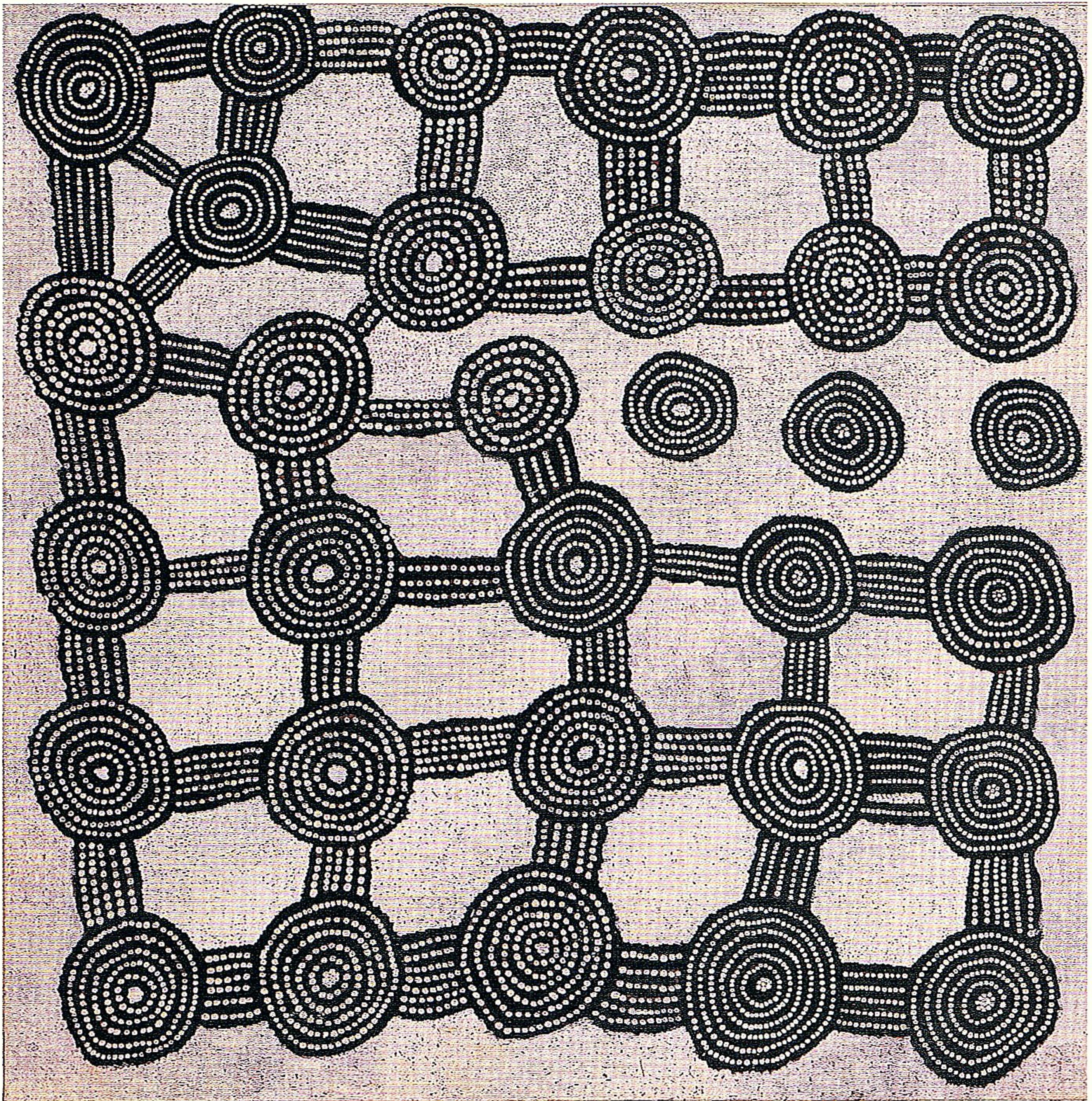
BELOW: Peter Booth, *Untitled*
(rocky landscape and snow), 1997,
oil on canvas, 91 x 183 cm



curiosity of the first timer. It is imagery that finds fashion favour with fans of twenty-first century minimalist cool—where it sits comfortably alongside '60s abstraction—as well as those who enjoy a tribal aesthetic, a term that is, itself, highly charged with ethnocentric strictures.

Aside from the work produced by traditional communities, contemporary Aboriginal practices also embrace an urban, political art, which finds expression across all media including photography. This art addresses important socio-political issues, such as the displacement of peoples from traditional lands, cultural genocide, racism and the social history of the mission system. It makes no concessions to aesthetics and directly tackles false narratives positioned within dominant histories. The presence of this art on the secondary market has grown significantly over the last two years and its emergence as a collecting area proves that this powerful work has made an impact on the imagination of art buyers.

The art market currently has two main venues for the promotion of Aboriginal art at auction. Sotheby's Australia has produced yearly, single catalogue auctions of Aboriginal art since 1997 that focus primarily on output from 1970 to 1985. In contrast, Shapiro Auctioneers (formerly Phillips International Auctioneers) conducts two auctions a year that exhibit Aboriginal art in the context of twentieth century modernist history. Launched in 1996 under the banner *20th Century Art and Design*, and renamed *Modern + Contemporary* in 2001, these events are devoted to showcasing decorative arts highlights from



Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi, *Designs associated with the rock-hole site of Wayuta*, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 91 x 91 cm

the Arts and Crafts period through Post War and beyond, in complement with dynamic exponents of the visual arts from the same time span. Work by emerging indigenous contemporary artists is exhibited alongside earlier material, where it is displayed in contrast to, and in complement with, a century of non-indigenous practice.

While the former saturates the viewer with an array of solely indigenous material, which provides an excellent educative forum, attending a public viewing of the latter enables one to experience something of the creative confluence present in the studios of those twentieth century masters ■

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Footnotes

¹ Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi began exhibiting Aboriginal art at Arco in 1990. Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls represented Australia in the 1990 Venice Biennale.

² This resistance may still an issue. Kimberley Art's application to show at the forthcoming December Art Basel Miami Fair was recently rejected. The gallery proprietor implied that his rejection was based solely on the assumption that Aboriginal art is seen as traditional and tribal, not contemporary. See Terry Ingram, 'Dealer says US sidelines Aboriginal Art', *Australian Financial Review*, Monday 20 May 2002, p. 7.

³ John Kavanagh, 'The Long Boom', *Australian Art Collector*, no. 14, October–December 2000, p. 57f.

⁴ *Australian Art Collector*, no. 15, January–March 2001; no. 19, January–March 2002.