

## Introduction

This exhibition presents a unique cross-cultural dialogue between two artists, Rusty Peters, a Gija man born on Springvale Station, east of Turkey Creek in Western Australia, and Peter Adsett, originally from New Zealand, who now lives at Humpty Doo, south-east of Darwin. Rusty Peters arrived in Darwin from the Kimberley in mid-April, and stayed with Adsett at Humpty Doo to paint. Together Rusty and Peter painted 14 canvases, seven pairs of similar size and a predetermined palette of black, white and red. Rusty began by painting the first canvas, and then Peter followed the next day with the second. They proceeded like this, painting on alternate days and engaging in contemplation and discussion in between paintings until the process was complete 14 days later. They describe this time as almost dream like in their statements, as if in another state of consciousness. "In the course of making the series, something happened which both artists desired, but neither fully foresaw. They opened a dialogue in formal terms."<sup>i</sup>

Peter Adsett was invited to go out to Crocodile Hole in 1998 not long after the Jirrawun Aboriginal Corporation was established there. Rusty spoke to Peter about a canvas he had painted at Crocodile Hole, which he called "Frog Consciousness". This painting represented the mysterious notion of 'water brain' or consciousness, which is something Rusty refers to again in his statement. It was then that the idea was first discussed; that the two artists might collaborate on a series of paintings, as Peter had just finished his *Waterhole* paintings, and their work touched on similar concerns.

Of course, when we use the terminology 'similar concerns' in a cross-cultural context such as this, it raises many issues in the complex and often vexed debate that surrounds cross-cultural collaboration. However, this project is not a collaboration so much as a dialogue or an exchange through painting; a coming together of two mature painters who respect one another as artists and thinkers and who want to work together and explore some commonalities and differences.

Rusty's paintings depict his country, his ancestry, his entire cosmology. He paints with complete seriousness, also representing abstract ideas to do with the meeting of black and white culture and the formation of language. His work neither belongs to, nor owes anything to the lineage of Modernist abstraction, which is Peter's domain. Peter paints with similar seriousness and the unashamedly Modernist notion that abstract painting is a law, and a way of thinking. His work is about painting itself and the reconciliation of opposites on many levels; from the quivering, liminal meeting of black and white on his canvases to the exploration of his own spiritual beliefs.

Both Rusty and Peter discuss areas of convergence and divergence in their statements; the points of coming together as well as the absolute autonomy of their work during the process of painting. Both artists are adamant that they do not wish to trespass onto the other's territory. In all this there is no hint of cultural relativity or reductiveness. There is no desire to create any equivalence in their styles or conceptual frameworks. Rather it is because of the very notion of, and respect for, *difference* that they are able to meet. It is by the affirmation of the two stances, the two laws, that this dialogue has been able to occur.

It is this position that is the key to reconciliation; a process of political and cultural negotiation based on mutual respect rather than cultural convergence. The process is

inseparable from the outcome when the artists say they enact reconciliation. This is not what they intended but is a bi-product of their dialogue and their actions. It is the hermeneutic limit, the very inability to truly put certain ideas into words that privileges a dialogue in the space of painting. So it is in the language of painting itself that this dialogue of reconciliation has taken place.

Cath Bowdler  
Darwin, 2000

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<sup>i</sup> Mary Alice Lee, extract from correspondence

Two things are paramount about this project: process and dialogue. In order to continue in the same vein, the artist's statements in this catalogue mirror the painting process that Rusty and Peter engaged in. The statements were derived from interviews in which the artists were prompted to talk about what happened when they painted together at Humpty Doo. Rusty's statement came first and then Peter responded to it with the prompting of similar questions.

### **Peter Adsett**

The moment we decided on the formal parameters, black white and red, the similar sizes and shapes...we entered the space of painting...a different consciousness. Rusty had been at Humpty Doo a week before he painted that first painting. We entered that space from the moment he painted his first painting.

Each time a painting was finished we would talk about the painting and sleep on it...dream about it....and as Rusty would say...let the spirit talk. Then wake up and paint. When Rusty was painting I was thinking and contemplating. You couldn't anticipate or predetermine the outcome. It was like lots of thinking, drinking tea, eating kangaroo, sleeping, dreaming, painting. That's how it went for 14 days. I enjoyed the seriousness and the conceptual process we engaged in. I responded to formal qualities in his work. Rusty painted and responded but each time the stakes went up...it got harder as the process progressed. It was about slippage...where not to go. It was like hide and seek ...like hunting. It was demanding for both Rusty and I....that was the challenge.

Painting has its own law...so I'm painting about painting...which is obviously a Modernist idea. When you come to abstraction you're talking about a language that has its own vocabulary. This is the law that I paint....the language of abstraction which has content and meaning. What underpins this is the meeting of black and white....whether it's paint, whether it's mythology, whether it's dark and light. There is an idea of shared ground. I was trying to eliminate the figure on ground relationship....so there's ground on ground. So what comes first...white on black or black on white. It's those forces that I deal with through process. The process is important because you engage in a ritual when you work at that level...you're on the edge....it's liminal....it's that threshold...that very edge of consciousness....that's where this whole process is played out.

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There is another element in the paintings. It's the fall from grace that relates to early Genesis but also to the Stations of the Cross. That's always in the paintings because it's about the human condition, how we feel, how we think and how we live. There is a religious core to my work. That's what we have in common. That's where we met. Rusty has his spirit and he has his painting. I have my spirit and my painting.

I respect the strength of Rusty's law....his respect for both laws. There was a feeling that two laws could stand beside each other and walk together. So the paintings are enacting reconciliation....the process of it...but they may never reconcile because of our understanding of what that word means. Whitefellas meaning is we come together under our law...it won't work that way. It may happen if these two laws, separate laws, are working together.

### **Rusty Peters**

Peter told me...come to my place anytime to paint. He told me...I start thinking a couple of days...start thinking in my mind for my country....Dream...true story. Come to my mind what I'm going to paint next day. Even before I got to Humpty Doo (Peter's house) dream come...what to paint. Spirit make all my painting ...not my idea. Dreamtime tell me what to paint. Even Peter dreaming and that make him think about his painting. You ask him that story. I told him when the dream come to you, the spirit telling him true painting. Everything go that way....can't stop until all the canvas finished. Spirit can't stop...always there for you.

I paint my way first and he paint his own way after me. I paint my way and he paint his own way. He was painting I didn't go and look...only after when he 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 making it our own way. After I look at his painting then I start thinking my way.

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) Peter say... 'That my way....that Whitefella way'. I don't know Whiteman's law. He ask me, 'What this country?'. I say 'That my father's country'. Then he start thinking other way...Whitefella way...like that. That how we work together. We want to find out black and white together – that real good...that black and white together.

That first painting, that where I was born, Springvale Station. That the gardia (whitefella) name. When I was born I didn't know anything. When I grew up my old grandfather tell me a story about law...teach me language. He said, " If you don't follow your own law, you're lost. This painting bring back early memory from grandfather teaching me...giving me spirit...my water brain...like river...seeing your face in the water... seeing cloud in the water...tree in water.....that what this painting.....bring back that memory, that law my grandfather taught me. Grandfather show me rock painting...reminder for all young people...that Blackfella schoolhouse...rock painting.

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Two laws....Whitemen want to find out from Blackfella and Aboriginal people want to find out Whiteman law. Blackfella want to find out about Whitefella...how he think...what his born life, and whitefella want to find out about Aboriginal Law. Aboriginal way...way Blackfella feel, his born life...what it like. Make each other understand both way. Peter got his own way...I don't know that law. He don't know my law but we respect each others way....share together...make us feel good. But different way.