WILLIAM FERGUSON

William Ferguson was born in Melbourne in 1932 and studied at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Melbourne Teachers College. During the 1950s he travelled to Central Australia and became intrigued by Aboriginal culture; over the following forty years his painting has always reflected this early interest. For him, as for the Aborigines, painting should celebrate the spiritual aspects of life. As he commented recently: 'I wish to project a profound aura of silence and optimism, and reflect mystery and spiritual resonances linked with my personal interaction with the Australian natives and their land.'

However, Ferguson has not sought to appropriate Aboriginal cultural motifs. As Gary Catalano has observed: 'He attempts the difficult task of finding in his own cultural heritage an equivalent set of marks to those which Aboriginal artists use when they evoke a sense of sacredness of the natural world. Ferguson, we could say, aims to be an inspired translator.'

Ferguson's academic career has involved teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels. He taught in secondary high schools, 1953–71, and then held positions as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Principal Lecturer and Head of Art and Design at Melbourne State College, 1972–81. He was appointed Senior Lecturer in Painting at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1982, retired in 1989, and now paints full-time.

During his career Ferguson has studied overseas but his interest in Australian anthropology has always influenced his painting. His recent works have focused on the importance of ochre and the widespread tribal belief that ochre is related to magical power.

Ferguson holds his first one-man exhibition at Argus Gallery, Melbourne, in 1962 and since then has held regular individual exhibitions in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and...
Canberra. He has also had three solo shows in Germany since 1986 — the last of these at the Dresdner Bank in Ulm, 1991 — and received a commission for 24 works from the United States.

The artist has won several awards during his career, among them the Kanyana Prize, Colac 1963, the City of Doncaster Prize, Melbourne 1967, and the Free Hutchison Prize, Melbourne 1974. He was also highly commended in the 1993 Blake Prize for Religious Art. Ferguson is represented in the collections of the Australian National Gallery; Monash University; the Tasmanian Art Gallery, Hobart; the University of Melbourne; Parliament House, Canberra; the Visual Arts Board; Arthbank and the Holmes à Court Collection. He is also represented overseas in the Rothschilds Bank Collection, London, and in the German Ministry in Bonn.

Can we begin by discussing the nature of art and spirituality, as you see them? What is it that makes a work of art 'spiritual'?

The ability of a work of art to evoke a spiritual response rarely happens — and with varying degrees of success. You cannot really will or desire a work to be spiritual because as soon as you do that you negate the chances. The more you try the worse it becomes. People who paint crucifixes and images they think will get the message across — with colour arrangement and so forth — it all leads to no avail. Conversely the person who paints a single line or gesture or a zone of colour — sometimes that succeeds in achieving what they were really aiming to do. This awkward situation between the intention and the final result leads us to ask: how do we know if the person has painted spiritual pictures? The abstract quality of the work is the really significant thing — the tone of the work goes well beyond the talent of the artist. Some people have tone, some don't — it's as simple as that.

Are we talking about an essence that goes well beyond form?

An essence ... this idea of spiritual essence goes back to the artistic credo of Kandinsky, around 1912, but even then he couldn't avoid reference to formal elements like colour, and how colour affects people. And he talked about how colour related to music. It is quite significant that with a lot of contemporary composers there are certain formal elements that are similar to painting and poetry, and some writing. With the more minimal composers, like Gorecki, and the Australian Ross Edwards, poets like Pablo Neruda, painters like Rothko and Clyfford Still and in the later Jackson Pollocks, there is this thing about spacing — time to meditate — that we haven't had before. I think this is quite an interesting formal thing that has happened with the spiritual in art in recent years — the idea of meditating — the 'blank' times of meditation are really the full times, when there is some spiritual element in play. And how the artist gets into the situation of preparing himself to make pictures that will have spiritual content is going to be highly individual, extremely rare, and it is even more rare to find a spectator who can communicate with the work. It is rare because we live in an extremely secular, high-powered, material world.

What is the difference, for you, between religious art and spiritual art?

Religious art can be highly spiritual. No-one would deny that the paintings of Giotto, and
DEAD LANDSCAPE. LAKE MUNGO
1995, acrylic on paper, 29 x 40 cm
Photograph Gary Sweeneyfield

This is one of a set of twelve small works on paper dealing with imagery associated with Lake Mungo and all its secrets — this landscape is dead now but was so alive 40,000 years ago. Only grooves, dark holes, wind patterns and vegetation remain. Within the shape of the old lake and surrounding dunes, the mystery of early life continues with the tracks of birds, feral goats and kangaroos. The sands change colour with the weathering and the changing light of day.
the early quattrocento paintings, are not spiritual but by the same token they are superb examples of works for the people — a high form of commercial art, where the Church was dictating quite a large amount of the content. But it almost appears that Giotto, perhaps without knowing it, has injected something into these works that we now call ‘spiritual’. This abstract quality in the essence of the work is hard to pin down. One can look at it like a huge theatre with very few props, and there is a mystery to it. Later on, Michelangelo might paint the same themes and everything is there — light and shade and the whole works. It can still have spiritual content, but in a different way. Sometimes the artist uses definite formal or compositional devices, but more often than not I think it is something else — the tone of the artist, the essence of the artist. Picasso once said that it is not what a person does, or how a person does it, but what he is that really counts. Perhaps Picasso — even in his egomaniacal way — was putting his finger on that essence which in him was his driving force. Picasso painted in a relaxed way and produced some outstanding works — of true essence. He admitted that he looked at primitive art to give him that impetus — he saw a nobility, a mystery, in it. Brancusi saw that too, in some of the simplified forms that he made. Rothko said that art has to be about emotion and it should be ‘tragic’. It might be better to say ‘evocative’ or ‘disturbing’. Great art is ‘disturbing’, whether it is tragic, or evocative, or spiritual — it can go either way. Artists use their various devices to create this, and it is all done unconsciously without bringing too much intellect into play. It is done by feeling and by tapping your own spiritual potential.

Does that mean that too much imagery in a work is a trap?

Too much imagery, for some artists, can be a disaster. Too much imagery in a work by Breughel is magnificent, but with another artist it could be dangerous. Most painters paint several pictures — one on top of another — and they fail to know where to stop. They have to stop when the work is complete. Otherwise, to add more elements to a work means you are starting a new painting.

Can you describe some of the early spiritual impulses in your career?

I was always interested in the mysterious, the invisible — and I still am. I cling, quite desperately, to that belief. I don’t believe that we are just skin and bones — I think there is much more to a person than that — and likewise I don’t think we should be so conceited as to think we are the chosen ones in this galaxy. I think this yearning for spiritual knowledge — knowledge of the invisible — is something that drives many artists, whether they are writers, painters or poets. It haunts you all the time. It’s something you can only get through communion with yourself, and exciting things in Nature. For that communion to take place is well known to the eastern artist, but is not so well known to the western artist. In the east, the early Chinese and Japanese artists had no trouble being in the landscape and contemplating it, making this contemplation part of their whole life, and deriving their imagery from contemplation. In a sense it is new to the western mind and viewed quite sceptically by those who define art formally in terms of composition, balance and so on.

Can we discuss what took you toward Aboriginal art and culture as an impetus for your own work? Was there something in your own background which led you this way?

I was an only child and I grew up with a family of painters who painted traditional land-
**DREAMING IMAGE**

1995, acrylic on canvas, 95 x 130 cm

Photograph: Garry Sommerville

This image centres around a large serpent or snake inscribed in crossing land-forms during the Dreamtime. The darkness of night and early morning light are both part of the work. The serpent is also associated with male and female legends and love magic.
scapes. I would be dragged off on the weekends to paint with my father and uncles. Often I prayed for rain so I wouldn't be dragged away! But I think in those years that I got a great joy from Nature — particularly the sea near Mt Martha. That area was, and still is, part of my life. I enjoy communion with the sea in all its moods, even now. On the other hand I also remember my first trip to the centre of Australia, close on forty years ago. When I saw Ayers Rock my response was different to most people — I walked away from the Rock. I thought the desert was much more interesting than the Rock itself. I thought that the desert made the Rock into an undulation. The openness of the desert was wonderful. I like to wander off and sit on a sand dune and just look at the desert, where there is no sound except the mournful cry of the wind going through a desert oak, and your mind does incredible things when you are in that situation. It races ... it's something that's difficult to share with anybody else. When I come back and paint I try to make that bridge, then, regarding the excitement that I felt ...

Is part of the excitement creating your own colours and colours from the earth?

It's probably a silly ritual that I carry on with. Most religions have their trappings and regalia, and as a painter I suppose I am performing a sort of High Mass by mixing my own paints ... I think actually going through the performance of making a picture is a sort of ceremony. Different painters have different ways of making that approach. One of the artists I greatly admire — Antoni Tapis — walks around a canvas on the floor like a dog looking for a place to settle, and then makes a swoop on the canvas — he wants to do it quickly so there isn't too much to interrupt the process once he has started. The process is terribly important, and knowing what the colours will do, and making your own colours, is part of a ritual. You have to sneek up on your picture, because the white canvas is always your enemy.

Did you gravitate towards Aboriginal culture because the Aborigines had more of a sacred bond to Nature, and a more profound response to the world than the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture you were part of?

I certainly felt that they had a greater relationship with Nature than white people had. That was obvious, even in the way that Namatjira related to the white man. Seeing the ethics was very moving to me, as a young man. The Aboriginal would not move into the area where you camped without waiting for you to invite him in ... To see an Aboriginal seated in the desert under a spindly mulga, in the shade of a hot day, was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen. The beauty of this proud man, and the way he walked in the desert. I'm referring here to the true native in the desert, not the fringe-dweller loaded with grog. I remember coming back and telling Arthur Boyd in the early 1950s that he should go out to Central Australia and we discussed where to go. He did go, and I expected him to come back with lovely pictures of the outback, but he came back with all those allegorical paintings of a black man and a white bride!

The visit I made to the Centre in those days (I first visited Hermannsburg and Palm Valley in 1954), understanding a little bit about the bush telephone and the psychic powers Aborigines obviously possessed and being a bit cross about what Christianity had done to them at the Mission stations — they were doing a lot of social good but were teaching them a religion that was perhaps inferior to their own in terms of rituals. I went to a Lutheran service
SHOOTING STARS — LAKE MUNGO
1995, acrylic on paper, 53 x 42 cm.
photograph: Gerry Sommerfeld

This is one of a series of works made as a result of a second visit to Lake Mungo National Park. The painting presents visual metaphors for the night sky and shooting stars over the area, that has become full of mystery with the finding of cremated remains of humans (pre-Aboriginal) over 40,000 years old. The rich dark sky is the witness to the burials and the change in compass bearings so long ago.
on Christmas morning at Hermannsburg and heard them singing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ in Aranda — I thought that was terrible, singing white man’s hymns. As payment they started getting white man’s flour and sugar, bad habits, diseases and all the rest. So I decided to dedicate my pictures to the Australian native, and that’s what happened. We had been given permission to visit certain areas, camping with Aborigines with fire sticks and happy children — it was quite an experience.

Were you able to communicate effectively with the Aborigines at the time, and have you maintained contact?

Most of them had contact with white people at the Mission stations and could speak some English. One of our native guides whom we did befriend was a man who took the first visitors up Ayers Rock, and he told us a little bit about Aboriginal beliefs — he was quite well versed in English.

I have kept up my reading in anthropology but never to the stage where it impinges upon my knowledge of their life and the landscape in which they work. I am paying homage to them. I get back whenever I can. I have a son who works with camels near King’s Canyon and this gives me access to some areas where tourists don’t go, and which I regard as very sacred. There are areas which have a strong spirit-presence, or aura, about them. One cave I know has three spears in it, and it hasn’t been disturbed during the last three years — things like that. There is a mystery and a romance about it. There are areas that are very friendly, but there are areas, too, where I wouldn’t want to spend the night because of the strong spiritual presence.

Could you discuss the importance of ochre to the Aborigines, and also in your work?

Ochre to the Aborigines is like gold to the white man. It is used in birth and initiation, and it is used in love magic and in death and burial. It can come in either red or yellow, or sometimes in a pale, white form. It is readily available at different sites. Ochre is traded and exchanged among the different tribes. Most knowledge of ochre is in painting on bark or on bodies, and also in sand painting. It is not seen in their art as ‘art’, but as a part of life. It is part of the everyday. Because it is part of living, it has some spirit-essence. This relates to the making of art — works of ‘spiritual’ significance. When the painter sets out to make a definite religious statement he gets in his own way. It is only when you can let all of that drop, and work on a daily basis... The irony of it is that if the artist has ‘got it’, and is relaxed, he’s going to make something of it....

Do you feel that a painting has to flow through you? Do you see yourself as the creator of your art or as a vehicle for it?

I see painting as involving rigorous tools for contemplation. You have to go through these paintings and get to a point where they are flowing from you. If you stop work, then that flow stops, and you can’t do it properly anymore. I usually paint in the morning. Before I retired, I used to hate going to work and leaving a painting halfway — I had to virtually start again with the process.

To start, I almost have to create a state of reverie. This state of reverie is not a state of trance, but it links to the alpha (or meditative) state more than normal. It can be enhanced by music. I get more enjoyment out of listening to music than looking at paintings, and I sup-
SORROW SCARS
1994, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 55 cm, photograph: Gary Sweeneyfield

White pipe clay is often used in the mourning of Aborigines, and scars inflicted by mourners. The making of the mourners' scarredeld for ceremonial occasions is a formidable task and blood is often shed as the scarredeld is applied. The purpose of these ceremonies is to celebrate the triumph of good over evil, and to purify the deceased.
pose the music is taking the place of the landscape — if I could paint in the desert I wouldn’t need music as a form of escape or reverie. I like romantic composers, emotional composers. I like Gorecki, the late string work of Beethoven, and the solemn works of Mozart. I rarely work in the studio without music — it’s a trigger for me, to get me into the alpha frame of mind. The rest of the world doesn’t count. I quite often read poetry — Neruda particularly — and love is a great inspiration as well.

*How do you know when a painting is working for you?*
I believe and teach that intuition is your best guide. I rely on intuition to tell me whether things are working well — it’s almost undefinable. You’re never on your own when you are painting — there is something driving you all the time, although I wouldn’t necessarily call it God ...

*Do you think that white people can enter into the same spiritual spaces as Aboriginal or native people, or do we have to work within our own belief systems, culture and potentialities?*
There are some spaces where we can across over, because Nature is the Mother of the whole thing. Nature has given us the order from which we draw inspiration. Just as an Aboriginal will look at the way trees are spotted across a plain and say that the trees have spiritual significance and are loaded with spiritual essence, we (as white observers) will look and realise that there is beauty in the way those trees are placed on the plain — but for a different reason. Nature is dictating. All the time we are bombarded with images from Nature — that is the common ground. And archetypal colours and forms can affect people across the boundaries of culture.

*Would you like to comment further on the psychological impact of colour?*
This varies according to individual experience. I was initially very excited by blue. During this period I painted pictures relating to the Space Age and the sky — blue seemed to be the colour. I find the sky exciting — it is so beautiful, although I don’t paint the sky very much.

As a student and teacher, I became interested in colour theory, and the rules had to be broken. Now I paint from intuition. I gravitate towards red. It doesn’t necessarily mean danger. It is passion. I sometimes paint yellow paintings — yellow can be a spiritual colour, and is acknowledged as such in Buddhism and Taoism.

*Have you had any major peak experiences or spiritual crises that have influenced your work?*
I have had experiences that are not rational, that lead me to believe in the spiritual. I have had some links with the Spiritualist Association over the years, and when I was young I explored hypnosis — I was interested in how the mind can be redirected. That led me on to become interested in spiritualism. I have had warnings about future events — knowing in advance, not necessarily about critical things. I hear things well in advance. Every art prize I have won, I knew in advance. Little things like that. The rest of the family are extremely sceptical about these things, so I keep it to myself. I’m quite aware of this other aspect of life.

*How do you keep the vitality alive then?*
I think painting is an outlet for a lot of this. Things you want to express can be painted through. Otherwise one tends to bottle things up. I am very critical of my own work. I destroy my work if I’m not happy with it. You try to paint a picture that will haunt someone

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with more than is obvious — that's what keeps you painting. If you paint honestly and you've got something to say, it will one day be recognised.

Do any specific spiritual traditions inform your art?
I skip over them all, and I draw from as much as I can. I was brought up as an Anglican but when I was 18 I tried all the denominations from Syrian Orthodox to the Salvation Army. I study comparative religion and philosophy, and find it very interesting to do that.

Has your perspective on art made you something of a loner?
Many male artists are very macho, and an interest in spirituality is not considered masculine. Ian Fairweather, whom I regard as a spiritual painter, was a loner. So was Paul Klee. Kandinsky was too, to some extent, although he was able to paint in a way that others found acceptable. Nowadays there are so many individuals in art that the idea of 'fashions' is not quite so prevalent. There is more tolerance towards individual expression, but there is still an intolerance of the intangible. The idea of the metaphysical can be accepted when it is linked to psychological and philosophical frameworks, but it is not easy to express spiritual things. I think of paintings as metaphors for the invisible — one should aspire to be a communicator of spiritual connectedness. We need to produce a medicine for the haunted — we all need to look, and wonder, and refresh the spirit.