

## Tim Johnson: Painting ideas

Tim Johnson's eclectic and visionary art is a generous—and provocative—contribution to our cultural life. Johnson began as a painter but by the late 1960s he believed 'that painting was exhausted and that finding new ways of using paint was simply an indication of this'. Instead he focused on ideas. Together with other conceptual artists in the early 1970s, his practice ranged over forms such as documentation photography, performance, sound, film, text and cross-media experimentation.

This interregnum was crucial. When Johnson returned to the medium in the mid 1970s, it was—as the exhibition subtitle suggests—to explore an expanded field of ideas, primarily through painting. This exhibition reviews the most important directions in Johnson's work from the early '70s to the present day, including his long engagement with music and enthusiasm for popular culture.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Johnson was quick to recognise innovations in contemporary Aboriginal painting from Australia's desert regions. His encouragement gave Indigenous artists support when others were less responsive, and his lasting relationships with leading painters from Papunya and other key centres were profoundly influential on his work. The many collaborative works he made with Aboriginal painters in the spirit of respectful dialogue are particularly important for cross-cultural relations in this country.

Johnson has continued to collaborate with painters from other cultures. His current paintings embrace a dazzling range of beings from Christian figures to Japanese manga characters to Buddhist deities. With its openness to Buddhist 'Pure Land' visions of heavenly serenity and harmony, Johnson's painterly world welcomes ideas, images and energies from many sources, in a considered spirit of wonder and delight.

Organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Queensland Art Gallery



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## Conceptual art

At the end of the 1960s, Tim Johnson abandoned painting. He became a central figure in the rapid development of a lively culture making and debating new forms of experimental, non-object-based art in Sydney at the time. Along with Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr, Johnson founded the cooperative experimental exhibition space Inhibodress.

Importantly, Johnson and his contemporaries explored what they saw as radical, free, democratic, more inclusive and often collaborative art practices. These ambitions for art were a sign of the times, of generational challenges to the status quo, and of very broad political, social and cultural changes: in many ways the artistic experiments of the early 1970s set out to systematically test the assumptions and conventions of art itself.

After some years, when these ideas had been thoroughly investigated, many artists went on to explore new and reconstructed individual practices—and just as many abandoned making art altogether. After a wide-ranging conceptual practice that included documentations of installations, performances (recorded on film and through photographs), artist books and Super-8 films, Johnson eventually returned to painting in the mid 1970s, with the parameters of his art permanently expanded and redefined by his conceptual practice. Having become an artist, Johnson was once again ready to work as a painter and make the paradigm transition to post-conceptual painting in Australia.

## Punk

The punk movement—a revolution in youth culture embracing music, politics and fashion—swept the West from 1977, led by bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned. When the Australian punk music scene exploded into life in the late 1970s, Tim Johnson was drawn to it as a resistant, energetic avant-garde form of contemporary art.

Johnson became an enthusiastic follower of several key punk bands, particularly Sydney's Radio Birdman, and documented many live music performances. He likened the live music experience to conceptual or performance art of the 1970s: 'I decided that the experience of seeing and feeling part of this kind of urban cultural experience was best represented with film or video. I decided that appropriation of the imagery wasn't enough'. His Super-8 films embody this idea and are a moving-image version of his punk paintings, attempting to capture the actual live experience of a collaborative performance.

## Papunya

Tim Johnson first visited Papunya in 1980. He and Vivien Johnson would make several trips to Alice Springs, Papunya and Kintore during the 1980s, documenting the art movement and purchasing work for what would become one of the country's most significant collections of Central Desert painting.

**'On his first visit to Papunya Johnson found, pinned to the noticeboard in the art advisor's house, a treasury of snapshot photographs ... taken for the artists by art advisors and friends... images of men in the act of painting or proudly displaying their paintings, held in front of their bodies or propped up against humpies... Taking his cue from the noticeboard photographs (some of which he rephotographed and incorporated into his art), Johnson began taking informal colour photographs of artists, their works and their family members.'**\*

At the same time as he was painting works based on his photographs at Papunya, Johnson was using his photographic and film documentation of the Australian punk movement as the basis for several small canvases. The concurrence of these two key influences is evident in paintings such as *Radio Birdman, Wickham Hall 1983*, where Johnson transcribes the dotting technique drawn from Central Desert painting onto the guitar-wielding members of Radio Birdman.

\*Roger Benjamin, in *Tim Johnson: painting ideas*, Art Gallery of NSW and Queensland Art Gallery, 2009

## The mature paintings

By the late 1980s Johnson had arrived at his mature style, combining an array of cultural references—from Aboriginal art, Chinese cave painting, Buddhist art from Japan and Tibet, Native American art, Christian iconography and many other sources—often with a shimmering field of dots inspired by his time working with Aboriginal Central Desert artists.

The dotting that Johnson introduced into his practice in the 1980s has varied greatly across individual works and remains a crucial aspect of his visual language. The optically vibrating ground of dots contributes to a boundless sense of space and time, and links the often disparate figures and objects in the works into a visually harmonious whole.

Johnson was given permission to use dotting by the Central Desert artists he worked with and his use of dotting has been an at times controversial gesture of solidarity with Indigenous Australia. However as Vivien Johnson argued in the 1980s:

**White excursions onto the terrain of Aboriginal representations are now highly problematic... but they are equally imperative in order to contradict in practice the dismal doctrine that no rapprochement is possible.**

Johnson explores how symbols and motifs from differing cultures, places and times can be combined visually as well as conceptually, resulting in these richly imaginative, multi-layered paintings. They propose a parallel perceptual plane to our own in which seemingly disparate strands of earthly life, otherworldly manifestations and spiritual realms can make sense as part of a greater whole.



## Pure Land paintings

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tim Johnson has gradually developed a complex, eclectic and synthetic set of imageries that expresses his interest in the Buddhist idea of the 'Pure Land'—realms of perfect beauty where enlightenment may be found. Importantly, Johnson's 'Pure Land' paintings embrace images and symbols from many different cultures, in an inclusive gesture incorporating the sense of beauty and wonder found across many different places and times. As the paintings have evolved over the years, Johnson has expressed this cross-cultural awareness by working with a number of key artists from other cultural traditions, including My Le Thi, Karma Phuntsok and, most recently, Nava Chapman, who contribute to his extensive composite works.