

**Jennifer Loureide Biddle. *Breasts, bodies, canvas: Central Desert art as experience.*  
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*Breasts, Body, Canvas* is an evocative book, providing a new and interesting interpretation of contemporary women's painting from the Central Desert. This kind of painting is devoid of iconicity that explicitly refers to the landscape or to sacred stories and the women who paint it prefer not to discuss stories in relation to them. The paintings therefore resist our understanding of what Aboriginal art is about, because we generally understand Aboriginal painting as a kind of map of landscape, or iconic representation of the sacred. The book argues against this understanding of Aboriginal art – the power of the work, for Biddle, is not in its symbolic meaning, but in its affect. As such, it is a book that contributes to debates about how we should understand the development of highly abstract forms of contemporary Aboriginal art, how this can be considered a specifically 'intercultural' art form, and why we consider this art to be so powerful.

Central desert art has changed significantly since 1971, when the elders at Papunya painted murals at the school, and later on board. These were the first paintings of a highly successful arts movement. We now associate this movement with dot paintings, yet dots have not always been prominent in this art. Howard Morphy (1998: 293-4) has pointed out that the emphasis on dotting occurs as part of a second wave of painting about a decade after the movement began. According to Vivien Johnson, dots became an important element of painting after communities began enforcing secrecy restrictions on displaying sacred motifs (1994: 34-6). Johnson suggested that the dots replace sacred motifs, and are a process of attenuating the references to the sacred. And there is some debate as to whether the dotting has any sacred significance. For instance, Christine Watson suggested that at least some dotting in Balgo women's art was used 'as a

purely aesthetic device' (2002: 253). Andrew Crocker thought dots were important mainly on aesthetic grounds: 'For many painters the dots are still secondary; for the talented they comprise an important part of the composition' (cited in Myers, 2002: 68). Fred Myers, however, considers a more plausible explanation for the inclusion of dotting is the motivation to make images 'flash', as Morphy (1989) argued in relation to cross hatching for Yolngu people. The optical brilliance or flash, according to this theory, is the aesthetic expression, or emanation of ancestral power (2002: 68).

Biddle's work operates within this explanatory framework of 'flash', and extends it. She attempts to explain *how* these abstract dot paintings emanate ancestral power, and *why* they are such powerful works of art. It is a book about *what* we encounter when we encounter Aboriginal art. Biddle contends, 'Central Desert artworks literally bring to life country, Ancestors, people. Moreover, they do so by literally enlivening us, the spectator. Painting brings history into the present as a lived experience and response....An energy emanates from contemporary artworks by women, a life force that is irreducibly bodily, palpably visceral, mesmerising in its effects' (12). These are strong claims that seem to extend beyond claims of 'what Aboriginal people believe', to claims of 'truth' about their art. Yet the book does not proceed as you might expect. We find an emphasis on 'affect' rather than argument.

Biddle's explanation of the term 'affect' is not exactly clear, as she surveys its various uses by theorists rather than attempting to explain what she means by it in a coherent fashion. She states that she does not mean that the works transmit Aboriginal sensibilities, or are expressive of their feelings. Rather, affect concerns physical responses. 'Put crudely, affect is generated not in the representation of emotion, but because of its capacity to engender response' (15) This response is involuntary, and at once physiological and social. Affect concerns our life as embodied beings. We may feel our humiliation, our anger, excitement, and so forth, our responses include the tensing of muscles, or an intake of breath. In art, they are 'trans-situational' in the sense that we may experience pains and pleasures that are removed from our own. Biddle's mode of writing attempts to echo the mode of production of the work; it seeks 'to evoke in the reader something of the sense of the lived life-world from which these works derive and of which they speak' (24). The book is separated into four chapters, 'on writing', 'the imprint', 'on skin' and 'on breasts'. Each chapter ranges across modes of delivery from the explanation of anthropological ideas to history, yet at the same time it evolves as a series of inter-related metaphors, illuminated by numerous plates and the discussion of the work of the artists.

The dominant understanding of Aboriginal art is as a primitive form of writing, and the standard means by which we interpret Aboriginal art is by 'decoding' its symbols. This encourages us to look at paintings as symbols, that is, as a means to understanding something else. We look through the paintings to their meaning, rather than at them. Contemporary women's paintings 'markedly lack Dreaming stories' and the artists resist explaining them. Because contemporary works deny us this satisfaction of icon and story, we are forced to look at them anew, to the manner in which they are painted. For Biddle, while not representational, such works are communicative. To understand this, we need to know something of how the mark is understood, and produced. Biddle explains that the corporeal marks the Ancestors left on country in the Dreaming are the same as the signs and symbols used in painting. In Warlpiri, these signs and symbols are called *kuruwarri*, 'a complex term meaning "mark, trace, ancestral presence and/or essence, cicatrice, birthmark and/or freckle"' (58). Such marks are believed to have power; the power to rejuvenate country and species, to control fertility and health, or to regulate social relations. This is true not only of the marks made on the country, but of those on the body, as skin is materially the same 'substance' as country as it is equally a medium in which Ancestral traces reside. 'Skin is made text-like by Ancestral imprinting. The cutting of the head, and other forms of scarification, in mourning and bereavement ceremonies, the holes made in nostrils at initiation, and, of course, circumcision and subincision, indicate the degree to which the surface and contours of the body are made by ancestral marks and potencies' (60). 'The techniques of painting turn canvas to skin to country' (61).

This leads Biddle to discuss the process of marking, and the preparation of canvas. Biddle points out that, in preparation for ceremonies, Warlpiri people rub oils into their skin prior to the application of ochre and design. This process is called '*maparni*', which the *Warlpiri Dictionary* defines 'to anoint [with oil (JARA)], paint, grease (with fat/oil), smear, rub on, rub with' (61). Of these meanings, she suggests that the notion of anointing implies an act of transforming the profane into the sacred. Anointment is not merely an action, as 'smearing' or 'rubbing on' are actions; it is performative, and changes the nature of what is anointed. Just as the body is prepared for ceremony, the canvas is prepared for painting. (62). Similarly, the ground is prepared for ceremonies. Not only are sticks and stones that may hurt the feet removed, but the site is brushed and raked and smoothed (64). Marks are not made merely on this surface, but *in* this surface, and are signs of ancestral presence. The Dreaming is not past, as it is repeated and recreated in the process of imprinting. It is, in Derrida's terminology 'iterable': repeated and repeatable (66).

This argument operates on the basis of an analogy. Biddle says that these processes of preparing skin or ground for ceremony, and canvas for painting are not only similar, but the same. The sacred nature of these paintings rests on the nature of marking, which is produced onto a surface that has been 'anointed'. Yet there is also a significant difference between the preparation of the body or ground for ceremony and the preparation of canvas that Biddle does not acknowledge. Preparations for ceremony involve the process of presenting sacred symbols; symbols that do not necessarily appear in the dot paintings. This raises the question of why we should interpret '*maparni*' in this context as meaning to anoint, rather than as to smear, or rub on, or rub with. To justify this, Biddle uses an argument from best explanation. She acknowledges that some advisors taught artists always to prime the canvas first, but argues her interpretation presents the best explanation because, in her experience, artists always prime the surface even if this is unnecessary because it has already been primed by the arts advisor. I agree this is one way to make sense of an interpretation – but it strikes me as an overly intellectualised one. There are people who think it necessary to warm the pot before making a cup of tea, or to pour the milk in last, or first, or to wash up in the order of glass-cutlery-china, because that is the way they have been taught to do it. In fact, we need no other reason, though we may seek explanations for our behaviour after the fact (and there may be a good reason, or may have been a good reason in past circumstances that no longer hold, such as living in a cold climate and wanting to keep the tea pot hot, of which we are not aware). There is no additional argument here – and one can't help wishing she had asked the artists what they thought they were doing.

Yet the discussion of imprinting the surface or ground is also one of the most interesting and suggestive elements of the book. Biddle writes, 'A debt to the difference between 'background' and 'mark', between ground and stick, between absence and presence – these are differences necessary for writing, for the constitution of meaning itself. This debt to difference, this debt to and detour via something else for the production of meaning, is precisely what is occluded in Western metaphysics generally and in notions of writing particularly...But it is a debt Warlpiri and Anmatyerr/Alyawarr women appear actively to acknowledge' (67). The mark, as imprint, is both Ancestral presence, and what reactivates Ancestral presence. In early acrylic painting, the dotting follows the line of the imprint or mark in such a way that the mark disappears; instead, the shape of the mark and its apprehension as a figure is manifested in and through the trace that surrounds it. (68) 'This sense of *kuruwarri* as imprint is further evident in how *kuruwarri* marks are put and repud. Thick indelible lines –

half circles, line, shape, will be painted and repainted. Ochre will be dragged and redragged on breast...Repetition is not only functional but serves to demonstrate a greater commitment to tracing and retracing as a practice, turning the trace into a mark itself.'(69) The signs of the ancestors disappear because they appear in and through the repetition. The shimmer, or optical flash, of contemporary Western Desert paintings is produced through this dotting process, and Biddle suggests, the efficacy of the *kurruwarri* marks depends on the creation of the shimmer. Making use of Glowczewski (1991), Biddle claims that the rhythmic, repetitious marking and remarking press the *kurruwarri* in. Dots simultaneously push or poke the canvas, at which they become the deepest point of the canvas, and at the same time optically float above it, creating movement between two realms above and below, human and ancestral. (72)

One of the strengths of Biddle's approach is that there is some credibility to the idea that the metaphors we use to understand a practice or activity do influence the way in which we experience that activity. For example, in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980: 4-5), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discussed the metaphor 'argument is war', and how we 'win or lose' arguments, as well as understand them as war in associated phrases like 'she demolished the argument', 'her criticisms were right on target', 'her claims are indefensible'. As they pointed out, if we did not think in these terms, there would be no sense in which an argument could be attacked or defended, and if we lived in a culture in which an argument was viewed as a dance, and the participants as performers rather than opponents, we would view and consider arguments differently, indeed, it would be strange to say that they were arguing. So, when Biddle suggests that contemporary women's painting should be seen as a form of writing and a specific kind of imprint, and introduces the metaphor of canvas as skin, then we should pay attention to how this activity is thought of, and experienced, differently by Warlpiri and Western artists and audiences.

The third chapter brings these ideas together. The surface of the body, which is rendered virtually the same as the surface of the country, allows for the exchange between human and Ancestor and the human and land. 'Dots and lines are not the fillers, additions, or a secondary outlining. They have...become the practice', Biddle writes (79). They make us feel not as a result of their representations but because of the affect of the imprint. The boundaries of skin are dissipated, between black and white, between land and people, people and Ancestor. It is for this reason that Biddle considers painting such an important medium of cross cultural communication. Yet, as she points out, skin is also a form of relatedness to country: skin names differentiate between Aboriginal people and land, and colour differentiates

between black and white Australians; the skin of the country is black. The paintings demand a recognition of Aboriginal people ‘that is not simply skin deep’ (94).

Where the first two chapters open up an exciting concept of marking and its relationship with affect, in the final chapter we are presented with an affective reading of breast. It is here that Biddle turns to the fact that these are women’s paintings, and that the breast is the primary site for Ancestral imprinting. This aspect of the paintings has, Biddle states, received little attention, and so we begin reading with great expectations. Biddle discusses what she describes as five ‘axioms’ of ‘a breasted ontology’, but here my patience ran out. The first axiom is that the works by these women stem from marks made on the breast. Yet, the axiom also appears denied in the premise of the book, which seeks to understand paintings without designs. And in the chapter on skin, in which Biddle discusses Kathleen Petyarre’s painting, the only connection to breasts is made as part of an extended metaphor:

A spatiality of movement and feeling is evoked here – a rippling across a surface, an undulation, wave-like, sometimes turbulent, sometimes lulling, almost audible, so tangible are the rhythmic pulsing ridges, hills, sand dunes left as a stick is pulled through the ground, ochre drawn on breast. The “lines” here enact sound...in the way that texture always incites other sensory experiences and specifically, it carries sonic resonances, for example the ‘brush-brush’ of corduroy is “heard” and not just “seen”.

Here it is the rhythmic sound of the singing of women that is suggested, the rising and falling of the breast and repetitious song cycles of Ancestral activities in voices that intone as much as they sing. (82)

Call me insensitive, but I think I do hear the brush of corduroy, without inverted comas. Moreover, I never see this sound. And while I think I understand the idea that the surface of the paintings ripple and undulate, and this could be like undulations of songs or intonation, I do not hear the song in the painting. I do not understand where breasts come into it, except that they, like many other things in the world, also undulate.

The second axiom is that ‘the breast marks as it makes and makes as it marks’. This involves the claim that ‘the breast is figured as a writing instrument’. Yet it is difficult to make sense of this claim. One wonders, ‘what do the breasts mark? What do they make?’ By way of explanation, Biddle presents another metaphor of sensory conjunction: the marks are ‘as felt as they are seen, as material as they are visual’ (99). Biddle discusses the

markings on the breast, and representations of breasts in a series of paintings, but not the marks made by the breasts. Then, I think I find the explanation: 'What makes these breasts potent is the way they are inscribed and, in turn, inscribe. What makes them generative...is the way they repeat an initial Ancestral imprinting of country.' But, I still don't know what breasts inscribe.

The third axiom is that 'the breast mark expresses a relationship of attachment', a specifically female conjoining subjects, in particular of infant to mother. 'The literal incapacity to breastfeed oneself, or breastfeed oneself, is here enacted by the very conditions of inscription – one cannot and does not paint one's own breast in *Yawulyu*.' (100-01). 'The literal imbibing of nipple, skin – the physical "latch on", mouth to breast...will make the subject socially and culturally subject to others. She will remain throughout her life indebted to, defined by and *in relation to* the bodies of others – and specifically here, the materiality of country as breast, country as body' (101).

Axiom four develops this into the idea that it is country that is fed, and it is country that feeds, and axiom five is that 'to view these works is to participate in their workings'. This appears to be based on the kind of lack of distinction between subject and object in the experience of art that Heidegger writes about. Biddle writes, 'the dots have the effect of making invisible the operation that made them possible: the incapacity to differentiate self and other', and then later 'the effect is to merge subject with matter – a merging not only of Ancestral body with country, not only of Ancestor 'skin' with 'surface' of the body, the skin, of the viewing subject. These works captivate literally. Our bounded bodies, like that of the Ancestors, dissipate. In viewing these paintings, it is impossible not to become immersed in the fleshing enfoldings of their animation. A certain dissolution of the self occurs...' (104). Impossible?

While there is much to admire about *Breasts, Body, Canvas*, the end is not uplifting, or illuminating. Its affect in this reader is the enervation produced by an over-extended, exhausted metaphor. Biddle fails to show that 'Central Desert artworks literally bring to life country, Ancestors, people... by literally enlivening us, the spectator'. It is hard to know what she means by the term 'literal', and the term, which is used liberally throughout the text, is at best understood metaphorically. Indeed, the entire thesis appears best understood metaphorically, even if you are also prepared to 'believe in' the Dreaming, and the Ancestors. A metaphor, as has often been pointed out – is literally false. But the reason we appreciate one is that, paradoxically, it shows us something true. At times this book presents a glimmer...

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"Jennifer Loureide Biddle has dared to deal with a daunting, dazzling array of 'remote' art in its multiple forms and complex contexts. The result is a profound, far from dispassionate book which does justice to an extraordinary canon of art." — Noeline Cole, *Journal of Anthropological Research*. She is the author of *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience*. Table of Contents Back to Top. List of Illustrations vii. Paper ISBN: 978-0-8223-6071-1 / Cloth ISBN: 978-0-8223-6055-1. Publicity material. Bk Cover Image Full. Indigenous men Desert experience Ethical issue and process Use of arts Positionality of researcher Visual methodology Indigenous health Participatory Action Research (PAR) Kinship relationship. This is a preview of subscription content, log in to check access. Biddle, J. D. (2007). *Breasts, bodies, canvas: Central desert art as experience*. Sydney: University of New South Wales. Google Scholar. Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (Eds.) (2007). *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. London: Sage Publications. Google Scholar. Charmaz, K. (2006). *She tute for Experimental Arts (NIEA), UNSW*. She is author of *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography has worked with Warlpiri in Lajamanu for over of Sexuality and Gender* (2002), *Why Stories two decades, as well as with other Central and Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Western Desert artists and art centres*. Her *Theory* (2011) and *Considering Emma Gold- book breasts, bodies canvas: Central Desert man: Feminist Political Ambivalence and His- Art as Experience* (UNSW Press 2007) *mod- torical Imagination* (2017). Jennifer Loureide Biddle. *Breasts, bodies, canvas : central desert art as experience*. Elizabeth Coleman. Abstract. *The Geometry of Desert*. Shelly Kagan - 2005 - Oxford University Press. *Against the Asymmetry of Desert*. Jeffrey Moriarty - 2003 - *No»s* 37 (3):518-536. *The Geometry of Visual Space and the Nature of Visual Experience*. Farid Masrour - 2015 - *Philosophical Studies* 172 (7):1813-1832. *How a Map Works in the Land Arts*. Sukyung Chung - 2008 - *Proceedings of the Xxii World Congress of Philosophy* 12:9-17. *What Do We Deserve? Bodies of Experience and Bodies of Thought: Freud and Kant on Excessively Intense Ideas*. Stuart Dalton - 1999 - *Angelaki* 4 (3):93-101. *The Epistemological Argument Against Desert*.