Coming home to the land

Donna Leslie

Artist Lin Onus had a way of stimulating empathy by giving people something to connect with—not merely on an intellectual level but at the level of the heart.

A decade has passed since the tragic, premature death of artist Lin Onus (1948-1996). Time has revealed the depth and breadth of his work, which was so inspired by the power of the land and of Aboriginal tradition, together with an acute awareness of the need to bridge the cultural gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Indeed, a retrospective of Onus’s work presented by the Queensland Art Gallery in 2000–2001, and a display at Melbourne Museum, In Honour of Lin Onus, (1 June 2002–1 June 2007), gives recognition to his wonderful artistic legacy. Onus was an artist who had that special ability to touch the lives of many Australians and to do so in creative and unexpected ways. The very fact that he was an Aboriginal artist makes his life and work all the more interesting.

A study of the art of Lin Onus reveals an interesting certainty: he often takes us on a journey into the histories and cultures of Aboriginal Australians, using themes and recollections that provide an opportunity for gaining a deepening insight into outcomes of colonisation processes and contemporary realities. It also, importantly, takes us on a journey into the land as a powerful place of healing and restoration.

Onus returned to the theme of Barmah (his father’s country) in the final period of his life, and this homecoming seems to tell us that he was looking at the land as a place where he could symbolically take refuge, a site where he could find spiritual sustenance and meaning. In the large painting on linen, Barmah Forest, 1994, (now in the collection of the Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra), Onus introduces the viewer to the jigsaw pieces that were a recurring symbol in his art, speaking of his need to rediscover lost pieces of his Aboriginal heritage. He seems to ask the viewer to engage with the work in a way that demands effort. We see how he communicates a sense of the living energy and the lifeblood of the land, yet it is also a land where something is missing. If you look closely, you’ll see that Onus has painted jigsaw pieces that don’t quite fit. In an unpublished chronology of Lin Onus’s life (1998/99), Onus’s widow Jo and his son Tiriki explain that changes to the land in the form of ‘farms, tourists, carp, and cows’ gave Onus a sense of the impossibility of attempting to ‘retrieve all the riches that were once
present’ in his father’s country, prior to colonisation. The jigsaw pieces that do not match seem to be a reminder of the impossibility of returning to a land unchanged by colonisation processes. Although Onus imparts a strong message of cultural loss and Aboriginal dispossession, he also, however, conveys a message of the eternity of land and of the ongoing cultural relationship that exists between Aboriginal peoples and the Earth. The land is related to as a country not only where we may all return, but a place of cultural richness, depth and comfort.

In early works of his father’s country, however, Onus conveyed his sadness over the way the land had been divided. He invited the viewer to take part in an empathic appreciation of Aboriginal connection with land, and in the shifting emotions relating to its inaccessibility. The theme of land division becomes apparent in paintings such as *Twice upon a time*, 1992, where Onus depicted one single piece of barbed wire to symbolise the fencing-off of land and its inaccessibility, over the image of a landscape containing a campsite without animal or human life. It seems as if he was attempting to paint the colonial, enforced removal of Aboriginal peoples from their traditional country, contrasted by the framing of carved, ceremonial trees that are a poignant reminder of the prior occupation of Aboriginal peoples on the land and of an ancient heritage. In other paintings, such as the small gouache on illustration board, *Mutjing (Father’s country)*, 1992-93 (now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery), Onus made reference to the designs found on traditional tree carvings in South-Eastern Australia, by overlaying a hilly land with the deep regular grooves of the axe. Then he illuminated everything with a single bright star.

O

Onus wanted to remind people of the tradition beneath the surface of everything. He had a way of stimulating empathy by giving people something to connect with—not merely on an intellectual level but, importantly, at the level of the heart. He wanted people to feel with him and to understand the Aboriginal experience and Aboriginal cultural life, through engagement with works that dealt at times with subjects consciously intended as a learning experience. Sometimes these subjects, such as the theme of dispossession, are challenging and difficult, but he wanted this sharing to be one where people could have the opportunity to relate truly to the message he was trying to convey. Jo and Tiriki Onus report that Onus came to believe that he could reach a far wider audience with art used as a political and social tool than with the alternative of ‘talking to groups of people about the plight of his people’. He was convinced that art could transcend the limitations imposed by other media. Art promised also to reach a global audience.

It is interesting to note that while Onus’s work might be understood for its political and social significance, it is equally important that it be understood for its spiritual value. Its spiritual strengths rest in its ability to communicate Aboriginal relationship to the land. While land may be understood as a place of healing, it may also be read as a site of reconciliation.
Although Onus explored a range of imagery relating to dispossession, he described himself primarily as a landscape artist until 1986, when his life’s direction was influenced deeply by his encounter with the late Yulungu elder and artist from Garmedji outstation in Central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Jack Wunuwun, who adopted Onus as his own son. Wunuwun was able to offer Onus a kind of cultural sanctuary by welcoming him into the Yulungu kinship system. This relationship provided Onus with the opportunity to learn Aboriginal traditional knowledge, which enhanced his own Yorta Yorta experience of the world. Through Wunuwun, Onus was given creation stories that he was permitted to paint, and an Aboriginal language he could also access. It seemed to Onus that his experience of tradition was ‘like a missing piece of a puzzle had been found and had ‘clicked into position’ for him culturally. In her book *Aboriginal Voices* (1990), author Liz Thompson quotes Onus affirming his belief that ‘traditional art will remain the foundation on which everything is built ...’ Indeed, it is Onus’s cultural reconnection with tradition that ultimately gave him the opportunity to find some of the missing pieces he was searching for. These pieces seem to hold the key towards healing some of the many losses that have been experienced by Aboriginal peoples in so many areas of Eastern Australia, where the tremendous onslaught of British invasion was first experienced from 1788 onwards.

In 1987 Onus was so inspired by his adopted father that he painted *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988 (now in the Holmes à Court Collection, Heytesbury), seated before an ochre palette; it is a compassionate, beautiful tribute and expression of respect. The elder is depicted with a gentle, relaxed expression, surrounded by imagery belonging to his country. In the top left corner, the design is broken by a contrasting night sky, into which Onus has painted a single star, representing the Morning Star, because Wunuwun was custodian of the traditional story associated with it, and was famous for painting the *Morning Star* series. It was the elder’s empathy with Onus’s sense of cultural deprivation which led to a relationship that would from this time onward sustain him.

In Lin Onus’s retrospective catalogue, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus* (2000), curator Margo Neale reports that from 1986–1996, Onus made 16 ‘spiritual pilgrimages’ to Garmedji. He began to title his works using the language of his adoptive family, and his work developed into a combination of images of land depicted both in Western style and Aboriginal symbol and story. In paintings such as *Arafura Swamp*, 1990, Onus depicts the interplay between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visual languages. Here, photo-realistic images of water lilies are interspersed with rectangular fragments reminiscent of Onus’s idiosyncratic jigsaw.

Onus’s depiction of land has been interpreted by art historian Sylvia Kleinert as not only a ‘means of retrieving and rewriting history’, but also vitally important because he responded to the land as a ‘cultural archive’. Indeed, it is the source and the centre from which we can spiritually regenerate. In Onus’s works, the land may be read as a gateway into reconciliation. Land is a healing medium because it is a place that remains inside the heart. Although it mattered to Onus that detailed knowledge of his Yorta Yorta language and ceremony had been lost to him, his work expresses a seeking to come home and a desire to reunite with the land as an integrative place of personal, spiritual empowerment.

*Donna Leslie* is an indigenous Australian, belonging to the Kamilaroi people of NSW, and a Research Fellow in the School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.

[end of page 31]