

***Remote Avant-Garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation.* Jennifer Loureide Biddle. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 304 pp.\***

Reviewed by Christopher D. Berk

*Remote Avant-Garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation* examines recent artistic developments amongst Aboriginal artists in Australia's Central and Western Deserts. Biddle's book complements literature on Australian Aboriginal art (see Michaels 1994; Morphy 2008; Myers 2002). To Biddle, recent aesthetic developments have received scant attention and she "seeks to address this lack" (2). In tracing experimental art—photography, sculpture, animation, and so forth—Biddle foregrounds the processes through which "Aboriginal tradition is revealed through experimental practice" (4).

Midway through, Biddle notes how the "new does not arise from nowhere" (142). While referencing a 2007 residential workshop in Sydney attended by Warlpiri women, this sentiment is present throughout Biddle's valuable text. These practices are not random or haphazard. They emphasize deep connections to long-standing traditions and cultural knowledge that are being enacted (and re-enacted) in new ways.

The book is organized into three parts, bookended by two stage-setting chapters and a brief epilogue. The three parts are "structural devices, thematic only and in no sense exclusive" (18). Biddle stresses specificity—of artist, location, and cultural group—in the context of Aboriginal Australia wherein broad generalizations tend to dominate.

Chapter one scrutinizes 2007's Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), in which the Australian Government deployed military forces to seize seventy-three remote Aboriginal townships (23) in order to counteract allegedly rampant (and never substantiated) child sexual abuse (Altman and Hinkson 2010). The NTER (and the subsequent Stronger Futures Policy) is the "occupation" under which the analyzed artworks are mobilized.

The next three chapters comprise "Part One: Biliteracies." They focus, respectively, on Tangyentyere Artists, an "Aboriginal-run and -directed Alice Springs Community Art Center" (41), painter June Walkutjukurr Richards, and photographer Rhonda Unurupa Dick. Each chapter features concrete instances of Aboriginal artists challenging dominant assumptions held by many Commonwealth agencies regarding Aboriginal literacy. Their works are defiant and demonstrative of Aboriginal multilingualism. This is a critical point, since the NTER was partially rationalized in terms of perceived (and expected) failing Aboriginal literacy. Artworks featuring text in Aboriginal kriol and local languages challenge non-Aboriginal viewers' assumptions. These works are indexes rather than icons (98), and complicate expectations of legibility and the representativeness of Aboriginal painting.

"Part Two: Hapticities" explores "touch-based visual aesthetics" (18), materiality, and how texture and form shape affective response. This was my favorite section. Chapter five on Tjanpi

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Desert Weavers intriguingly shows how Tjanpi, “an introduced experiment in women’s fiber art practice” (110) and an “explicitly secular practice, with secular materials and secular intent” (113), has begun to reveal the sacred through practice (119). Chapter six examines the use of ochre (*yurlpa* in Warlpiri) in experimental art and features truly powerful prose addressing the connections between its agency, ancestral ties, and the Dreaming or *Jukurrpa*, what W.E.H. Stanner long ago described as the “everywhen” (2009:58). Chapter seven looks at Yarrenyty Arltere Artists and how animation and sculpture enact Aboriginal counterhistories (162).

“Part Three: Happenings” focuses on Aboriginal art as history and the cultural exchanges accompanying national and international exhibitions. Chapter eight details the pioneering Canning Stock Route exhibition. “Chapter Nine: The Warburton Arts Project” describes the success of international exhibitions in China, and queries what might be enabled when Ngaanyatjarra is translated into non-English languages and “beyond the confines of a national language by whose very tongue and deed...Aboriginal people have been dispossessed, misrepresented, silenced” (212).

Biddle suggests that the art is primary and her text secondary (17). To buttress this claim she includes 20 plates in full, vibrant, color, and 92 figures. The chapters are well conceptualized and easily stand on their own merit (earlier forms of five have been published previously). However, the connections between and across chapters, while signposted throughout, were rarely foregrounded in her analysis and the book would have benefited from a proper conclusion. Biddle stresses that this book is a starting point, but what might we learn by engaging these innovations as a whole? While the “remote avant-garde” is not a field “that can be pointed to or simply bundled up by these pages” (7), I would have liked a more extensive unpacking (and interrogation) of the category and a deeper conversation across the varied “microhistories” (11).

*Remote Avant-Garde* is a welcome contribution to scholarship on Aboriginal art and cultural heritage. Its abstract and theoretical prose, while a pleasure to read, would perhaps be daunting to lower-level undergraduate audiences. I would (and assuredly will) assign it (or individual chapters) in upper-level or graduate courses in Museum Studies, Visual Anthropology, or Indigenous Studies.

## References Cited

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