

EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

INVESTIGATING KEY ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

TIM JOHNSON LOTUS BORN





TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
with Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok

LOTUS BORN 2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas
9 panels: each 198 x 91.5 cm; 198 x 823.5 cm overall
Contemporary Collection Benefactors Fund 2006
317.2006.2-1

Panels left to right:

1. Medicine Buddha
2. Mandala
3. Dakini
4. Shakyamuni

5. Padmasambhava

6. Tsong Khapa
7. Rainbow body
8. Yantra
9. Wheel of law

‘Like a one-man UN Tim Johnson crosses the borders, eschews the bureaucracy, and gets down to the real feat of presenting a world that is multi-hued in every way.’

Ashley Crawford, 2005¹

‘Using principles of abstraction as I learn them from Western art history and Aboriginal art, I am painting a desert landscape as it was revealed to me at Papunya ... I am constructing images of the desert with both Aboriginal and Buddhist presence. The whole is a metaphor for city living as it can be loaded and overloaded with signs and meanings.’

Tim Johnson, 1987²

Nobody escapes their age completely, but through the decades, Tim Johnson has been one of those artists who didn't just know 'where it was at', he knew *what it was*. His imaginative, experimental and sometimes spiritual quest for human transformation through art has taken him from conceptual art and profane performance art in the late 1960s and early 1970s to DIY punk/new wave in the mid 1970s, and from Indigenous art at Papunya in the 1980s to the sacred practices of Buddhism of west and central Asia more recently.

Tim Johnson's performance art (late 1960s and early 1970s)

Counter-culture of the late 1960s.

The late 1960s was a time of the Vietnam War and psychedelic drugs, student disorders in Paris and peace symbols, alpha brainwaves and revolution as everyday life. It was a time of the first photos of Planet Earth, as seen in the *Whole Earth Catalog* (a conceptual precursor to the world wide web), captioned: 'We can't put it together. It is together.' People were reading hip oracles like Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan (futurists of technology and the media), as well as analysts of authoritarian culture's schizophrenia like R D Laing and Wilhelm Reich. It felt as if there were a new culture (a counter-culture) to resist with. And the generation of which Tim Johnson was a part was not just disputing a few borders of the art scene, there was a whole new mapping system operating.

Punk is a style generally associated with intense nihilism (I suck, you suck, the whole world sucks, and who gives a damn). Seething with rage and pain, you sense punks champing at the bit of the present system of things, but were they lunging after some glimpse of a new and better world? Could you see politics through punk? Stand against power through punk? Was the middle-finger-for-all philosophy of punk – expressed through the throbbing danger of abused amplifiers, the aggressive gobbling of lead guitars, the piston-like pogoing of the crowd, and the belligerent screams of the singers – another way of 'doing life', a performance of living?

'Experimental' is often journalist's shorthand for 'tentative' or 'doubtful', but for many of the artists in the late 1960s it was a way of investigating experiences to trace what was really happening. Tim Johnson's performances (such as *Disclosure* 1971–72) were testing not only art itself, but morality and sexual politics, and along the way embarrassed the viewer with his/her own voyeurism. *Fittings* 1971–72, for example, involved adjusting the clothing of willing participants: pulling up skirts, pulling down pants, with all the rigor of a conceptual artist's documentation.

Though carried off with a casual sense of 'serious fun', these scenarios re-drew the boundaries between intimacy and the unknown, private and public, power and powerlessness. Bodily rigidity – whether of commuters sleepwalking to work, or soldiers at attention, or terrified victims – corresponded to mental rigidity. These interventions in public spaces challenged the over-programmed responses of everyday middle-class life: those prevailing forms of social reality that make us feel even more numb and complicated than what sociologists call 'alienation'; and where our community 'highs' have the bland, detached excitement of TV.

The punk scene (mid 1970s)

According to Tim Johnson, who formed his own band, punk continued 'the conceptual art idea that art is everywhere and everyone is an artist'.³ Three-chord punk music could be played by anyone. Spawned from a do-it-yourself ethic, it also bypassed traditional recording and distribution routes, with recordings often being made available in exchange for a blank tape and a self-addressed envelope. The anarcho-punk movement had its own network of fanzines, or 'zines', which disseminated news, ideas and artwork from the scene, and punk graphics played a big role.

Among the local spirit guides were Radio Birdman. Although the band called their style 'sub-pop', they were one of the first punk bands in Australia, playing 'very harmonious, complex music'.⁴ Deniz Tek and Rob Younger formed the group in Sydney in 1974, and performed in a pub they managed in Taylor Square, which they named The Oxford Funhouse. Many of their songs, such as 'Hand of Law' and 'Descent into the Maelstrom' (from an Edgar Allan Poe story), deal in apocalyptic images of war and violence, but these are more than balanced by lighter pop culture references in tunes such as 'Aloha Steve and Danno', an ode to the 1970s TV show *Hawaii 5-0*.

In some of Johnson's punk paintings, Papunya-style dots are used to depict a spotlight halo around Younger's head.

John Glover (1767–1849) was already a well-established Royal Academy painter (a kind of English **Claude Lorraine**) when he arrived in the colony of Van Diemen's Land in March 1831, at age 63. He made a garden around his property in Launceston along the lines of the one in Patterdale, England, so beloved by his family, creating a deliberate comfort zone and safety rail, and establishing a sense of belonging amidst the unfamiliar.

The obvious misalliance between people and place is evidenced in the highly coded compositional rules that European landscapists brought with them in their search for the picturesque, the heroic and the sublime. Tightly composed masses of woods and groves 'gilded by sunbeams' brought the Romantic

vision of Nature to life. Artists like Glover, **Conrad Martens** (1801–78) and **Eugene von Guérard** (1811–1901) imposed their 'dressed salad' conventions on Tasmania or New South Wales. It took time before their tidied-up Claudian views succumbed to a truly local vision: the totally unclassical arrangements of sinuous gum trees and foliage (their 'spot dottiness', as Glover called it) and broad expanses of intense, un-European light, with olive-greens, ochres and deep blues, looking as if emerging from an overexposed photograph.

Indigenous politics: place, land, spirituality

Orphaned from Mother England, and without the birthright entitlements of the Indigenous people, to be 'antipodean' is almost by definition 'to be out of place in one's place'. This mix of belonging and not belonging underlies so much of Australian art and culture, and accounts for much of its fraught energy.

The mismatch between Indigenous and non-Indigenous was evident from the moment Europeans arrived. But, since the 1950s, the significance of Aboriginal culture to an Australian identity has become increasingly obvious. Clearly there are, and have been, dangers in this rapprochement, of white people building bridges to black people using condescension as support.

How then have artists negotiated this border? Think of **Albert Namatjira**, **Margaret Preston**, **Arthur Boyd**. How successfully can art act as a threshold-crossing device? How do we connect the sacred to the non-sacred in our contemporary culture? And how do contemporary artists navigate between the will to believe and corrosive cynicism? Think of **Juan Davila**, **Imants Tillers**, **Gordon Bennett**, who use art as a threshold-crossing device, and as cultural war.

Albert Namatjira, while not the first Aboriginal artist to work in a European style, was the most famous. As tourism to the Centre increased in the 1950s, Namatjira found he was able to earn a significant living for himself and his family, by painting watercolour landscapes in the pictorial idiom of the Hermannsburg school: ghost gums with luminous white trunks, palm-filled gorges and red mountain ranges turning purple at dusk.

Margaret Preston was the leading artist-advocate of Aboriginalism, the first non-Indigenous artist to find in Aboriginal art the source for a distinctive Australian identity, and the first modernist to take up the cause of Aboriginal art.

Aboriginalism, (according to Ian MacLean, *White Aborigines: identity politics in Australian art*), can be defined as an attempt to understand what it means to be a white Australian through metaphors of Aboriginality rather than ones of empire.

Aboriginalism proposes a hybrid Australian who is part Aboriginal and part European – though this overstates a model which arguably was assimilationist rather than genuinely hybrid. It incorporated rather than engaged in a meaningful dialogue with Aborigines.

Arthur Boyd travelled to Central Australia in 1951 as a 30-year-old, where he witnessed the strained relationships between Indigenous and white Australians. Coercion, exclusion, strangeness and silence marked (and often still marks) the interaction between the two. In *Persecuted lovers* 1957–58, a painting from Boyd's series *Love, marriage and death of a half-caste*, a rifleman takes aim on two lovers with silent murderous anticipation.

Juan Davila is a painter who passionately believes in using art to facilitate social change. Born in Santiago, Chile, Davila moved to Australia in the 1970s to escape the violent, totalitarian regime of Augusto Pinochet. His paintings mercilessly satirise Australia's repressed history of genocide and its fear of the mixing of races.

Imants Tillers incorporated Michael Nelson Jagamara's *Five dreamings* 1982 as one of the main images within his *The nine shots* 1985, and was criticised for removing images from their cultural contexts and juxtaposing them with images from other places and times. *The nine shots* eventually led to **Gordon Bennett's** powerful riposte *The nine ricochets* 1990, which in turn borrowed images from Tillers.

Tim Johnson and dialogues in the desert (1980s)

In 1980 Tim Johnson visited the Western Desert art communities at Papunya, 258 kilometres west of Alice Springs. Though he had first seen their paintings in 1977, Johnson now started photographing and painting the Aboriginal artists at work. He was soon invited by senior men – including Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Michael Jagamara Nelson – to join them in creating cooperatively evolved canvases, resulting in approximately 30 collaborative paintings over the next two decades. This collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists marks a critical moment in the history of Australian art and Australian landscape painting.

Dialogue is a transformative process, a way of creating something new.

You are not talking to yourself in the background. You are talking with each other, and only each other. In dialogue, meanings aren't already known or given to us as if others in the relationship had never been there at all: that is when dialogue turns into monologue.

Monologue is the one-eyed crusade of the imperialist self, silencing the voice of others in the conversation.

Fixed-point perspective, developed in Renaissance Italy in the 15th century, dominated Western culture, establishing both the scope and the limit of what Europeans could visualise. In the 18th century it helped navigate and colonise space. It was bent on mastery and control. Armed with trigonometry, compasses, ballistics, telescopes and surveyors' sticks, Europeans tried to rationalise the magic of the relentless horizons by supplying themselves with an ego's point-of-view. But that monocular vision also outlines the limits of representation in Western art. **Gordon Bennett** used perspective diagrams in works such as *Triptych: Requiem, of grandeur, empire* 1989 in order to contain the limitless horizon, alluding to the impact European values and systems have had on the lives of Indigenous people. By overlaying perspective diagrams on the landscape, Bennett reminds us of the learned and culturally specific systems that influence knowledge and perception.

At Papunya, Johnson found a practice where he could reconcile his early 1970s conceptual work with painting. His collaborations evoke memories of the ethos of a community – *dialogue*, rather than monologue.

Interaction moves back and forth, from one to the other, becoming the material of new narratives. For Johnson, 'it is one thing to repaint from other artists, it is another to repeat conditions under which they paint'.⁵ At a time when Imants Tillers and others sought recourse in the idea of 'appropriation' as a contemporary art strategy, Johnson cut through the abstraction and joined the Aboriginal painters on site, painting canvases on the ground. By mixing the figurative (images of the Papunya painters) and the abstract (dot painting), he was moving away from the alienated gaze of the onlooker sitting in front of the scene towards a sense of affiliation and belonging with the ground itself.

In the so-called Dead Heart of the desert, the explorer Charles Sturt hallucinated impossible perceptions: in that vast emptiness he recorded seeing non-existent seas, 'deep blue and in it a conical island of great height'.⁶ Johnson's post-conceptual painting in Papunya is about spatialisation – the shifting relationship between the viewer and the art object. Johnson's work embodies both conceptual and performance modes beyond modernist abstraction. With a trance-like subtlety, he creates a kind of fractal shimmer, at once abstract and very concrete, which plots a vector of transformation – a practice of space, something more gripping than trying to resolve post-Cubist spatial problems.

Johnson superimposed layers along a depth axis, going into and coming out of the picture. This stratification is a tool for affirming new connections. Johnson himself plotted the formal character of this transition as a passage from 'sequential overlay (printing process etc)' through 'superimposition (opposed to narrative accumulation)', and eventually to 'molecular surface opposed to continuous linking of elements – either by association or by being joined'.⁷ The dots become talismanic in their promise of freedom. 'Each dot', wrote Johnson, 'acts as a vanishing point, making the scale of the painting potentially huge – since it can be thousands of vanishing points in the distance brought close to the viewer'.⁸

For Johnson, the loss of perceptual coordinates is not a source of postmodern 'anxiety of influence' or displacement, it is the precondition for meditation and a source of remedial wisdom.⁹ Person and place are not distanced; nature and land are not 'out there' but in an ongoing relationship with the self. During painting of this kind – like many other psychodynamic practices that deepen your awareness and attention, whether the 'bliss-emptiness' of Buddhism or other contemplative traditions – one imagines the body climbs inside the mind, which makes for a more fluid intelligence. The more awareness you have about the way your attention works on a moment-to-moment level, the more suppleness, the more space will form around that activity. This quality of attention has the ability to de-reify the given reality of ordinary experience, which in some sense is the first step on the ladder of gnosis (the understanding of spiritual mysteries that Gnostics believed essential to salvation).

Johnson's canvases – finely nuanced, alert, lyrical – represent a category of performance, a ritual of inscription that takes place over several days. Though successive, like assembly lines or diary scheduling, there's something refractive here to the regular forms of organised time.

Abstraction. The move from representation to abstraction in Western art seems to involve some separation from the world and from the imitation of nature. The processes of abstraction involve creative interactions between thought and matter, the intangible and the concrete, and so are not culturally specific. Non-figurative Aboriginal art – whether seen on bodies, hollow logs, barks, baskets, or now on canvas and newer media – makes specific, coded references to ancestral designs, licensed by particular clans, triggering ancestral narratives that re-animate the country itself. Unlike Cartesian abstraction, which withdraws the imagination from the real, the indigenous worlds (and Tim Johnson) see the earth as alive, rich with symbols overflowing with movement and meaning.

Buddhism: 'The path is a network of paths' (1990s)

Like the desert – like nature itself – the mystic Eastern symbol of a mandala evokes the infinite: an emptiness that can contain everything.¹⁰ At the same time he was experiencing and studying Western Desert painting, Tim Johnson was developing an interest in Buddhism and Asian art (in particular, early Chinese cave paintings, and Tibetan and Japanese art), and later American Indian art.

There can be a wild, metaphysical poetry to these practices for the Westerner, a kind of 'magic realism', where everything is interconnected, manifesting one thing in all the different multi-faceted ways that it can, simultaneously. The path is a network of paths.

Johnson's embrace of polytheism does not set up conflicts between opposites (like heaven and hell, or chaos and unity); its logic is not either/or, but both/and. Thus he may absorb Gnostic Manichaeism, Mahayana Buddhism, Mongolian shamanism, Catholicism, heretical Sufism, and Taoism—without trying to tie them up into one grand system. Their coexistence allows him to make patterns in the imagination. Curator Linda Michael describes Johnson's paintings as having an intelligibility 'more like that of a dream, in which everything is potentially significant and we feel at ease to connect anything to everything'.¹¹

Johnson's collaborations – with Vietnamese-born **My Le Thi**, Tibetan-born **Karma Phuntsok** and Queenslander **Brendan Smith**, among others – make art (and the ideas that art contains and communicates) a vehicle that is dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescrptions of the world.

In *Generic painting* 2000, across a shimmering field of tiny white dots and soft, glowing clouds of colour, Johnson creates a work that pays homage to his teachers and opens up a field of transcendent possibilities. As the artist notes:

Generic painting draws on a variety of experiences and sources to create an illusory world where recognisable cultural signifiers (Buddhist imagery, Papunya dots, Shinto shrines, aliens and UFOs) combine to create a kind of generic space for the viewer. Each panel centres on a subject, the first being West Camp at Papunya in 1981, the next, the historical Buddha touching the earth, the next, Mt Meru the mythological centre of the universe, then the earth itself, then Mt Kasuga, a Shinto shrine in Japan. Interwoven with these themes are many other references and interconnections. Various landscape styles that include a contextualised use of dots and photographic and chance imagery are used to create a field of readable signs.¹²

An important issue is the bridge between a sacred and a non-sacred culture, between the abstract and the concrete dimensions of life, by way of Johnson's dual stance of being both inside and outside, and by way of his collaborations (to act as two rather than one). As Buddha's disciple Subhuti observed of the bodhisattvas: 'They stand firmly because they stand nowhere.'

Ufology

Strangely, many older cultures connect the idea of extraterrestrials with gods, law makers and ancestors. When older cultures can shed light on contemporary questions like this, painting can be used to investigate... art can be a conduit for experience and in so doing can actually change things.¹³

Aliens? Today, with our electric lights, our labs and our all-seeing CCTV cameras, many think the notion of UFOs is strictly for the loopy. The first popularly credited UFO sightings occurred in 1947 – the year that gave us the CIA and information theory, the decade that gave us TV, the Bomb, digital computers and LSD. They tell us how the world works, and how we construct our realities. 'The UFO', wrote Erik Davis, 'is the rumour of god stitched into the dark web of our military-industrial-media complex'.¹⁴

'In religious experience,' wrote Carl Jung in his 1959 book *Flying saucers*, 'man comes face to face with a psychically overwhelming Other'.¹⁵ Close encounters have a dark side. The gods may beam down in a celestial glow, but more often they lurk on the edge of revelation, in the outer dark.

So while Johnson has been exploring the unfolding boundary between mind and matter through his paintings, aliens represent what it means to be a mind *in* matter. Their strangeness makes them qualify as fundamentally spiritual objects, even if they are an enigmatic rent in our Western certainties. An encounter with an alien would lead to every earthlings' ultimate identity crisis.

Pure Land painting or an Australia without boundaries?

More than just making a great polytheistic fusion of transplanted religious deities and practices – mixed, matched, refracted and refined across space and time – Tim Johnson proposes, in the here and now, an Australia without boundaries. Johnson's work reveals a person open, at the crossroads, centred by lines that connect East/West/new/old. It orchestrates an encounter between European, Asian and Aboriginal bodies considered from the point of their virtuality or becoming. The becoming-Aborigine of the Australian, the becoming-Asian of Australia, the becoming-Australian of the Aborigine and Asian.

Tim Johnson has said:

It would be great if Australian art could be seen within the context of Aboriginal, Asian, European and American traditions and still have its own identity. Since this is probably impossible, one has to work in a symbolic space, perhaps like the Buddhist Pure Land, or the mandala itself, to create an illusory reality or a virtual reality in which the space that the artwork occupies is revealed to the audience that can read enough signs to begin to unravel its meaning.¹⁶

Johnson's paintings encourage us to see art far beyond their undeniable 'thingness' and far beyond Art. His later work – with its screen of dots, smoky hazes, multifocal spaces, human figures and arcane spirits – proposes something more collective than any New Age individualism seeking personal space: a *republic of intangibles*; an effaced Australian self, absorbed in an Australian infinite.

George Alexander

Coordinator of contemporary programs

Notes

- 1 'Tim Johnson: imitating art', *Age*, nd
- 2 Quoted in Susan Cramer, *Illusory worlds: an essay on Tim Johnson*, Mori Gallery, Sydney 1992
- 3 Influences, Tim Johnson art site, <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~tmjohnsn/influences.htm>
- 4 Tim Johnson, Influences, Tim Johnson art site
- 5 Tim Johnson, 'Artist statement', in *Sixth Biennale of Sydney: origins, originality and beyond*, exhibition catalogue, Biennale of Sydney, Sydney 1986, p 142
- 6 C Sturt, *Narrative of an expedition into central Australia, performed under the authority of Her Majesty's Government, during the years 1844, 5, and 6*, <http://books.google.com/>
- 7 Johnson in Cramer 1992
- 8 Tim Johnson, 'SPACE' in Kurt Brereton (ed), *Australian mythological sights, sites, cites*, Third Degree, Sydney 1986, p 88
- 9 See Harold Bloom's *The anxiety of influence: a theory of poetry*, first published in 1973, second edition published in 1997 by Oxford University Press
- 10 See Dhyani Buddhas 2001, *Installations*, Tim Johnson art site, <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~tmjohnsn/installations.htm>
- 11 Adele Hulse and Linda Michael, *Three views of emptiness: Buddhism and the art of Tim Johnson, Lindy Lee and Peter Tyndall*, Monash
- 12 Tim Johnson letter to Deborah Hart, 2001, National Gallery of Australia, <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=133253&PICTAUS=TRUE>
- 13 *Voice Literary Supplement*, Feb 1993, p 72
- 14 Carl Jung, *Flying saucers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979 (1959), p 16
- 15 Tim Johnson, *Parallel worlds*, UTS Gallery, Sydney, www.utsgallery.uts.edu.au/gallery/past/2003/parallel_1003.html
- 16 Tim Johnson in a letter to curator Wayne Tunnicliffe, 26 July 2001

WORK IN FOCUS

TIM JOHNSON

(Australia, b1947)

WITH BRENDAN SMITH AND KARMA PHUNTSOK

LOTUS BORN 2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

9 panels: each 198 x 91.5 cm; 198 x 823.5 cm overall

Contemporary Collection Benefactors Fund 2006

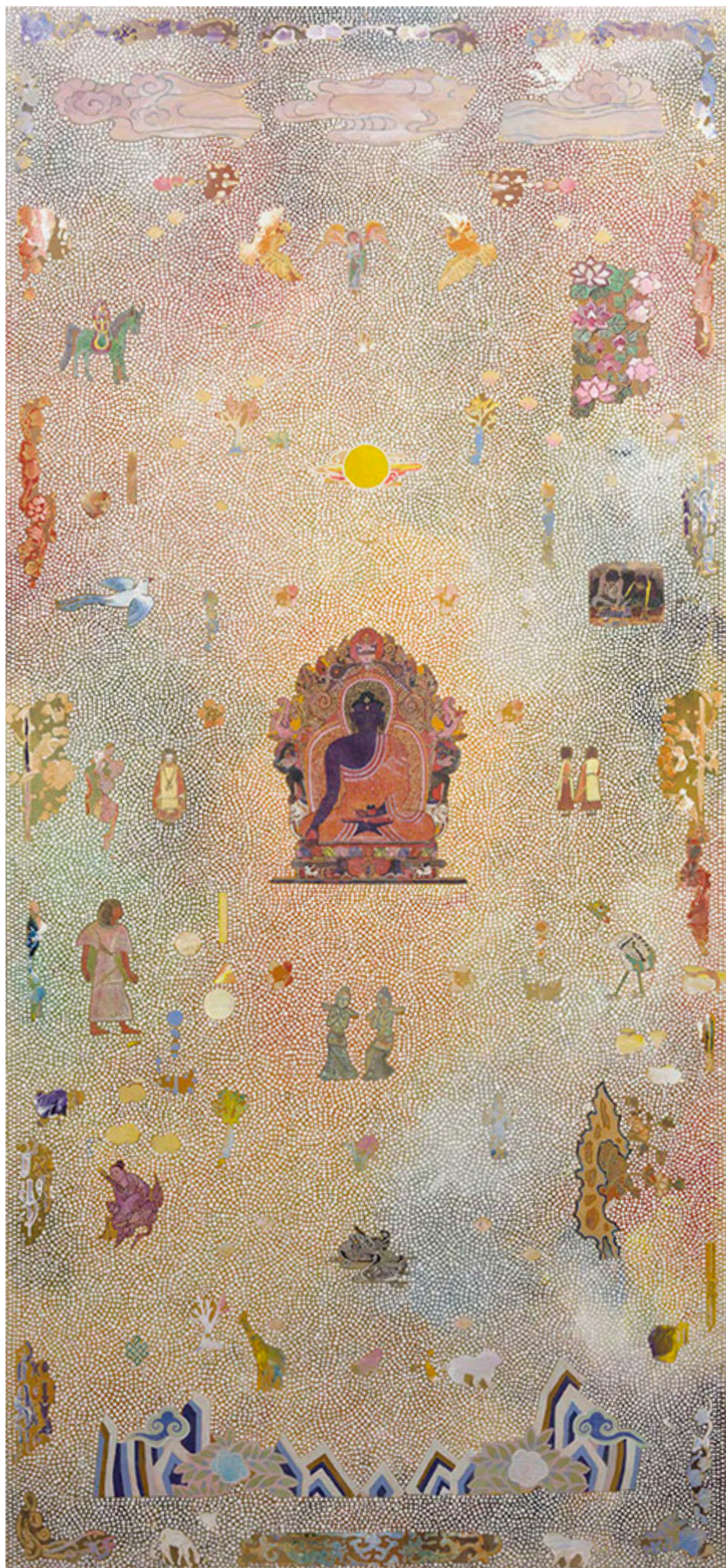
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Spiritual beings, Buddhas, Egyptian gods, trees, temples, creatures real and mythological, mandala forms and Japanese anime characters float against a field of dots (closely spaced, widely spaced and overlapping), which have been placed in concentric circles. Apart from their source in Aboriginal painting (where pigment is applied with a stick or the reverse of a paintbrush), these dots also recall diverse influences such as French pointillism and the Benday-dot matrixes of photographic reproductions explored by pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein. They are painted over a shimmering haze of light colours (a muted palette of ochre, gold, apricot, pink, green and blue), which contributes to a sense of space and time that is potentially boundless, yet links the seemingly incommensurable elements into a visually harmonious field.

The title of this nine-panelled painting, *Lotus born*, refers to Padmasambhava (depicted in panel 5), who is said to have been incarnated as an eight-year-old child in a lotus in the middle of a lake in India (*padma* is a Sanskrit word for 'lotus flower'). In the eighth century, he journeyed across the Himalayan Mountains to establish Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan, where he is better known as Guru or Ugyen Rinpoche.



- 1 **Medicine Buddha**
sits on a throne engraved with gems at the centre of the palace in the centre of Sudarsana, the city of medicine
- 2 **Mandala**
is loosely translated to mean 'circle'. It represents wholeness, and can be seen as a model for the organisational structure of life itself – a cosmic diagram that reminds us of our relation to the infinite, the world that extends both beyond and within our bodies and minds
- 3 **Dakini**
is a female embodiment of enlightened energy
- 4 **Shakyamuni**
is the historical Buddha, king of the Shakya tribe (563–483 BCE)
- 5 **Padmasambhava**
is a Lotus-born Indian mystic and tantric master, second only to Buddha Shakyamuni (panel 6) as the most famous figure in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition
- 6 **Tsong Khapa**
(1357–1419) was the main teacher of the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drub (1391–1474). His name means 'he born in the onion (Tsong) place'
- 7 **Rainbow body**
is a body not made of flesh, but of pure light
- 8 **Yantra**
is a geometrical pattern made of several concentric figures (squares, circles, lotuses, triangles, point) that enables you to retrace your steps from the outward-directed world of multiplicity to the inward focus of unity
- 9 **Wheel of law**
refers to the cycle of birth, death and re-birth



TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
with Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok

LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 1 of 9: MEDICINE BUDDHA
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LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 2 of 9: MANDALA
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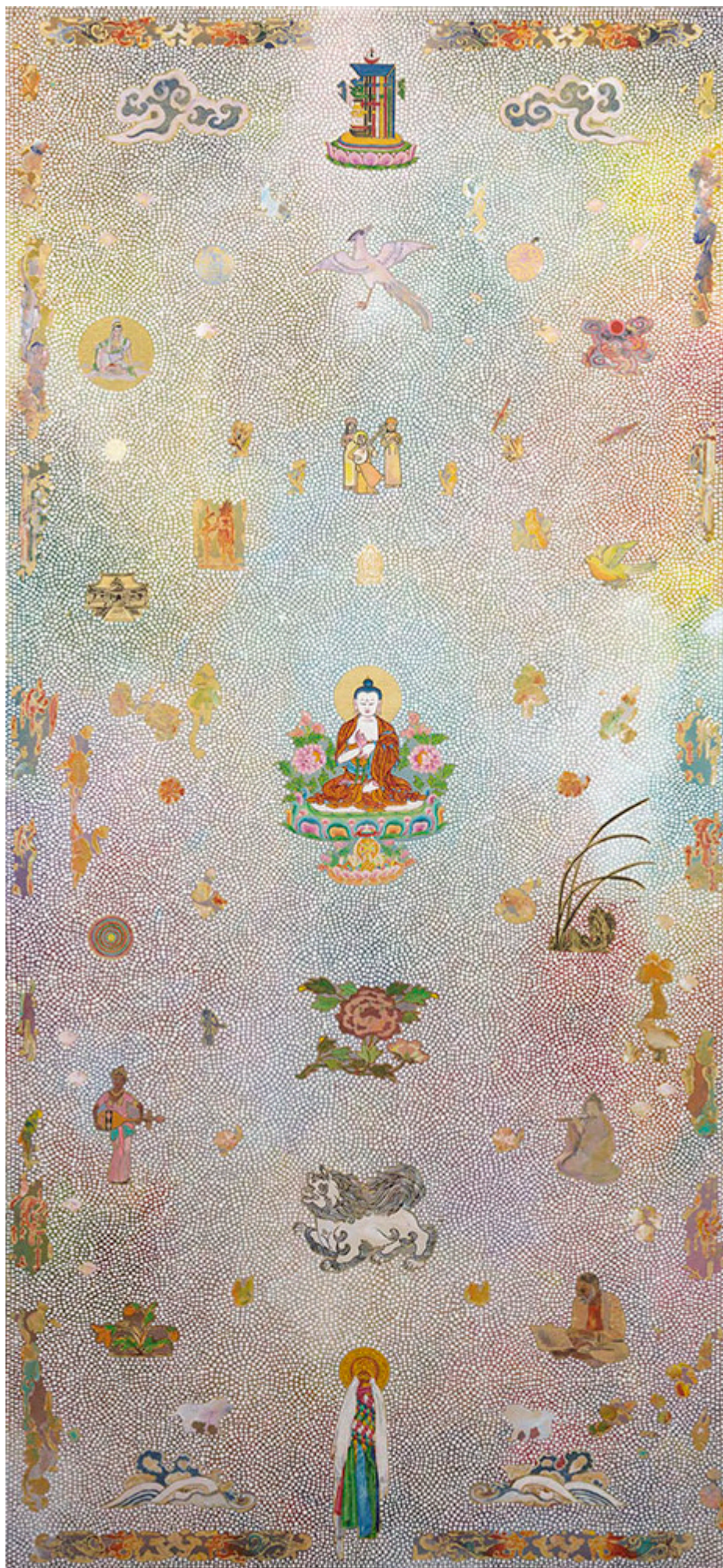


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Australia b1947
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LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 3 of 9: DAKINI
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
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TIM JOHNSON

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panel 4 of 9: SHAKYAMUNI
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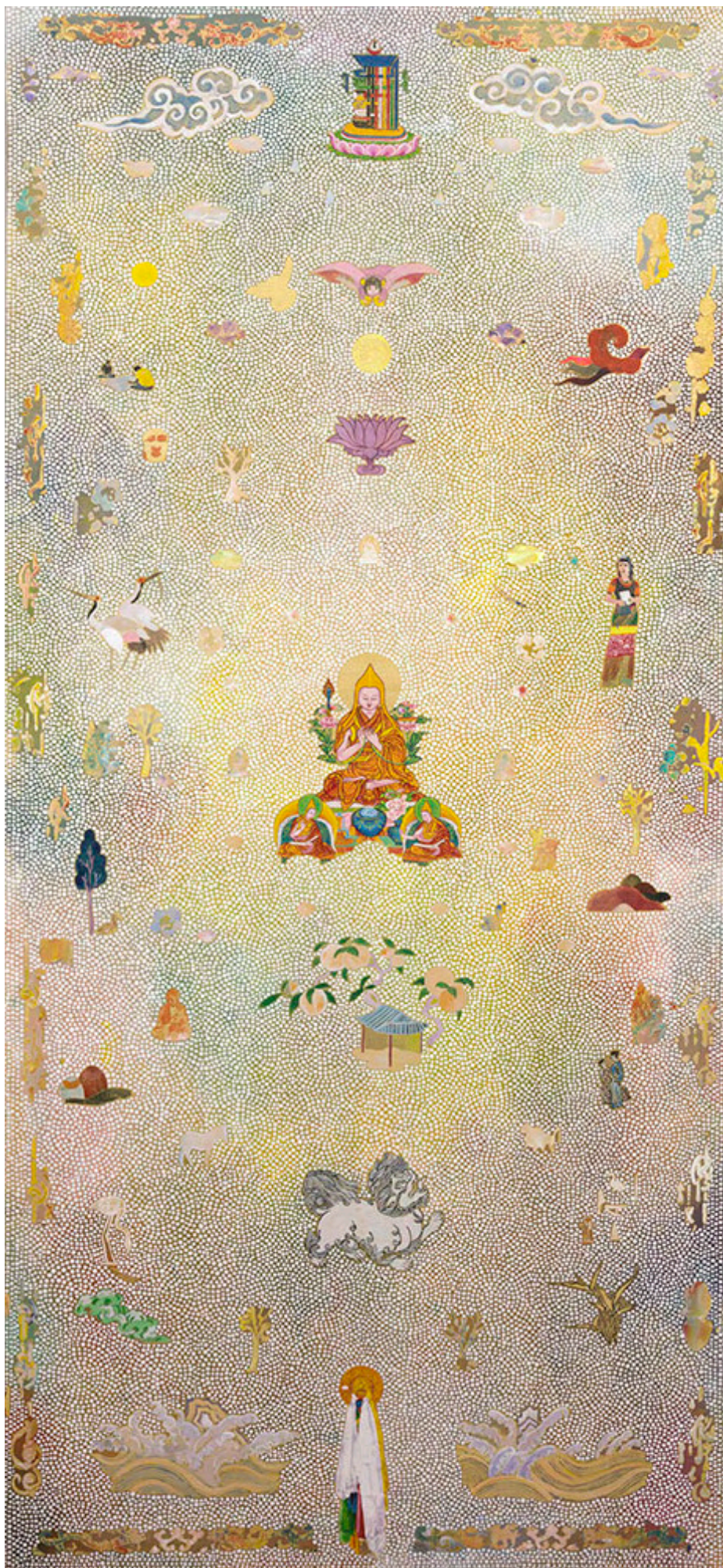
TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
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panel 5 of 9: PADMASAMBHAVA
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TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
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LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 6 of 9: TSONG KHAPA
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Fund 2006

317.2006.a-i



TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
with Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok

LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 7 of 9: RAINBOW BODY
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
9 panels: each 198 x 91.5 cm;
198 x 823.5 cm overall
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Fund 2006
317.2006.a-i



TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
with Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok

LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 8 of 9: YANTRA
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
9 panels: each 198 x 91.5 cm;
198 x 823.5 cm overall
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Fund 2006
317.2006.a-i



TIM JOHNSON

Australia b1947
with Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok

LOTUS BORN 2006

panel 9 of 9: WHEEL OF LAW
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
9 panels: each 198 x 91.5 cm;
198 x 823.5 cm overall
Contemporary Collection Benefactors
Fund 2006
317.2006.a-is

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING/VIEWING

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MacLean, Ian. *White Aborigines: identity politics in Australian art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998

Tunncliffe, Wayne. 'The symbolic space of Tim Johnson', in Lynne Seear and Julie Ewington (eds), *Brought to light II: contemporary Australian art 1966–2006*. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane 2007, pp 167–75

Exhibition catalogues

Benjamin, Roger. 'Jointly and severally: the Johnson way of art', in *Antipodean currents: ten contemporary artists from Australia*, Guggenheim Museum, New York 1994

Cramer, Sue. *Illusory worlds: an essay on Tim Johnson*, Mori Gallery, Sydney 1992

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Gates, Merryn. *Tim Johnson: across cultures*, University of Melbourne Museum of Art, Parkville, Vic 1993

Johnson, Tim. 'Nine bends of the river', in *Tim Johnson*, Mori Gallery, Sydney and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne 1987, p 6

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Michael, Linda. *Yab yum: collaborative installation by Tim Johnson and My Le Thi with Karma Phuntsok, Daniel Bogunovic and Edward Johnson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2001

Vodcast

Peer2peer Tim Johnson: an Education Programs Youth Audience Initiative, video interview, Art Gallery of NSW,

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/timjohnson

For further resources, information and programs related to Tim Johnson and his work see also:

Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Tim Johnson is represented by Mori Gallery, Sydney; Milani Gallery, Brisbane; Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne; Lister Gallery, Perth; and Chapman Gallery, Canberra.

His work is held in a variety of other public galleries including: Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide; Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; National Portrait Gallery, Canberra; University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane; and Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- Tim Johnson works with a diverse range of cultural signs and symbols. Examine *Lotus born* closely. Create a Johnson 'decoder card'. Develop a visual inventory allocating the signs/symbols to either Aboriginal, Asian or Western culture. Investigate their use and/or definition within their original context. Suggest other ways that *Lotus born* can be decoded.
- Discuss how Johnson's strategy of appropriation and re-contextualisation of these signs and symbols stimulates new ways of reading them. Debate if it is important for an audience to understand the meaning of each individual element of the composition or if it is part of his conceptual whole.
- Johnson most often paints on the floor of his studio rather than standing with the artwork vertical on an easel or wall. Investigate the parallels between this approach to painting and the approach of many Indigenous and Buddhist artists. Experiment with painting an artwork while it is resting flat on the ground. Examine how this technique changes the artist's relationship to the artwork physically and conceptually. Assess if there is evidence of this in the way Johnson visualises his subject and the way he represents it. In what ways does this challenge, or scramble, Western art's traditional conventions of art making?
- Examine Johnson's compositions. Are they structured or unstructured? Imagine his process of making marks on canvas. Assess how they are made – with brushes, fingers, stencils, templates, or all or none of these things. Do you think this process is conscious and thought through, or random and open to chance? Johnson most often uses a key image in the middle of his canvas. What function does it serve in each panel of *Lotus born* and across all nine panels as a complete artwork? Suggest how Johnson's use of dots is also an important compositional strategy. Survey Johnson's wider body of work. What role does colour play? What is the 'Tim Johnson' palette? Are there correlations to his cross-cultural influences and interests? Discuss the ways colour can function within an artwork conceptually and symbolically.
- Within each panel of *Lotus born* Johnson has accentuated a sense of space so that it seems at once flat and wall-like from afar and endlessly deep up close. Propose how his use of scale and layering produces shifts in visual perspective.
- Johnson comes from a conceptual art tradition. Consider his symbology, painting techniques, influences and cross-cultural appropriations. Discuss whether you consider a work like *Lotus born* to be as much a conceptual artwork as a representational one. Debate if Johnson's representations of 'other worlds' also reflect the ever-shifting cultural diasporas of contemporary society, particularly in Australia.
- Johnson's career has spanned four decades, with his practice encompassing the punk music scene, performance art, conceptual art and painting. Investigate each form of practice and the concepts and ideas that underpin each. Suggest how Johnson has incorporated aspects of all of these in his artworks and practice as we understand it today – some may be obvious, and some not; some are visually evident in the final artwork, while some are part of his studio practice and techniques.
- Investigate Johnson's interest and participation in collaborating on artworks. *Lotus born* was produced with two other artists, Brendan Smith and Karma Phuntsok. Is it clear when viewing the work, who did what? Whose artwork is it? Suggest the benefits and challenges of collaborating with other artists on the one work.
- Investigate Johnson's visit to Western Desert communities at Papunya and the artists he met and worked with in the 1980s. Research the controversy that followed his collaborative work with these artists and his use of their motifs. Discuss why this has been equally celebrated as a landmark in Australian art history and criticised as a re-colonisation of Aboriginal people and their culture. It is important to note that Johnson was invited and given permission to participate in this art making and appropriate certain elements of it. Debate whether this makes a difference to how you perceive his practice and view his artworks.

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Cover:
Tim Johnson (Australia, b1947)
with Brendan Smith and Karma
Phuntsok *Lotus born* 2006 (detail)

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