

haps to suggest that this sublime object is first of all meant for us, that it is not at all obscure and mysterious but designed for and not existing outside of our gaze. As the Lacanian cultural analyst Slavoj Žižek says (and this would apply equally to object X): "The distinction between the phenomenon and the Thing can be sustained only within the space of desire as structured by the intervention of the signifier [we might say the gaze]".

What is all this to say about Petyarre's painting? To begin with, it is to contest any notion of it existing in two parts, even "flickering back and forth between them" – between the overview and the ground-level view, the macro and the micro, the ideal and the real, the international and the Indigenous, the unchanging underlying Dreaming and its local variants. Between those feathery, whirling brushstrokes that seduce and distract us and that X which marks the site of the women's initiation ceremony, not meant for us. Rather, if we can say this, the *whole painting* is this sublime, elevated, glittering surface, which shines all the more brightly insofar as there is nothing

**We cannot repeat often enough:
Aboriginal art is painted for its spectator,
exists because of the other.**

behind it. That X, which is the whole painting, is not unknowable, transcendental, noumenal, but marks precisely the chiasmus between the transcendental and the empirical, "sustained only within the space of desire as structured by the intervention of the signifier" – art or the spectator's gaze. Put simply, the painting is not split *externally* between it and what lies beyond it, but *internally* by the fact that it exists for the gaze of the other.

This is not at all, however, to do away with the mystery of the paintings, or to say that their stories are not to be taken seriously, are merely outdated superstitions or holdovers of a disappearing folklore. It is rather to think these Dreamings as this X, this meeting place between the transcendental and empirical, the artist and spectator, black and white. They are "at once a pure semblance devoid of substantial content and something more real than reality itself", as Žižek says of the sublime object. And though this may appear insensitive, a way of denying the 'otherness' of Aboriginal art, we would claim that not only does it not do away with its secret but it actually heightens it, strengthens it. (The idea that these Dreamings come about only in their crossing over or crossing out – are themselves a kind of crossing – is the only way to protect them both against their cultural appropriation and that reductive 'New Age' reading of them as 'spiritual' or 'religious'.) We cannot repeat often enough: *Aboriginal art is painted for its spectator, exists because of the other.* This is the only means to counter that 'nostalgia' in which we are able to distance ourselves from Aboriginal beliefs and customs, to pretend that we are looking through another gaze, that our gaze is not already taken into



Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming*, 1996. Synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 122 x 122 cm. COLLECTION: PRIVATE COLLECTION, MELBOURNE. COURTESY: ALCASTON GALLERY, MELBOURNE

account. It is only in this fashion that we might break that understanding of Aboriginal art – still dominant at all levels today – which sees it as 'primitive', 'innocent' or 'child-like'. And to return to that question of the 'all' at stake in Aboriginal art with which we began, we come back to that lesson taught us by Kant (and embodied by Kngwarreye and Petyarre): the 'all' is not something beyond representation, as though a painting could ever go beyond itself, but an effect brought about by a limit *in here*. The very fact that there is a limit – experience as limited – is itself evidence of the 'all', is itself the 'all'. As Kngwarreye says, answering once again the question of the subject of her art: "Whole lot, my Dreamings, pencil yam, Mountain Devil Lizard, grass seeds, a Dreamtime pup, emu, the favourite food of emus, green bean, yam seed... That's what I paint: whole lot". ■

REFERENCES

- Geoffrey Bennington, 'X', in *Interrupting Derrida*, Routledge, London, 2000
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Macmillan, London, 1992
Christine Nicholls, 'Kathleen Petyarre and the Heroic Odyssey of Arnkerrthe', *Art Monthly Australia*, October 1998
Ian North, *Expanse: Aboriginalities, Spatialities and the Politics of Ecstasy*, University of South Australia Art Museum, 1998
Slavoj Žižek, 'I or He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks', in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993