

## Chapter 5

### 'Urban' Indigenous art

5.1 The committee recognised two parallel but linked developments in Indigenous art. The Indigenous art of remote central, north and west Australia is a diverse but high profile movement. It is frequently supported by art centres, and art coordinators working in remote communities. Some of the art is produced using traditional materials such as bark and ochre, while much of it is made with modern materials, particularly acrylic paint on canvas. Most of it has strong, explicit ties to traditional Indigenous culture and country.

5.2 There is also another story in Indigenous art. Smaller numbers of artists, but with an equally prominent profile, are working mostly in southern and eastern Australia, often in the major cities. They work in a wide range of media, and their works, as well as being sometimes more politically charged, have more complex, mediated links to Indigenous culture – Brisbane's Fire-Works gallery refers to 'a strong emphasis on the contemporary rather than the ethnographic'.<sup>1</sup> This chapter briefly discusses these mostly urban artists in the context of the broader inquiry.

### 'Urban' Indigenous art

5.3 There are many Indigenous artists who have grown up, trained or worked in south-eastern Australia, particularly the cities of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. They include some of the country's most successful and well known, such as Bronwyn Bancroft, Richard Bell, Tracey Moffatt, Lin Onus and Michael Riley. Their work is different in nature and background to the art of the central and western deserts, the Kimberley and the Top End. These artists are often referred to as urban Indigenous artists. This is terminology the committee accepts, while recognising that their identity is more complex than that. Bronwyn Bancroft grew up in Tenterfield in northern NSW<sup>2</sup>; photographer Michael Riley grew up around Dubbo and Moree;<sup>3</sup> painter Richard Bell was born in Charleville<sup>4</sup> and grew up in outback Queensland;<sup>5</sup> Lin Onus

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1 Fire-Works Gallery, About us, <http://www.fireworksgallery.com.au/About.htm>, accessed May 2007.

2 Designer Aboriginals, Biography, <http://www.bronwynbancroft.com/2.html>, accessed April 2007.

3 Ms Brenda Croft, 'Up in the sky, behind the clouds', in Brenda Croft (ed.), Michael Riley: Sights Unseen, National Gallery of Australia, 2006, p. 25.

4 Richard Bell, 'Bell's theorem of Aboriginal art: it's a white thing', Brisbane Institute, 11 November 2003, [http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/brisbane\\_institute\\_bell\\_theorem.html](http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/brisbane_institute_bell_theorem.html), accessed April 2007.

5 'Bell raiser', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 2004.

grew up in Melbourne but frequently visited his father's country on the Murray River.<sup>6</sup> Their art may often be distinguished more by its subject matter, media, and the artists' relationships to contemporary art than by its geography.

5.4 Over 70 per cent of Indigenous Australians live in urban centres.<sup>7</sup> Art can be just as important to them and to their cultural and economic future as it can be to the Indigenous people of remote northern and Western Australia. The bulk of public support for the arts targeted toward Indigenous Australians has flowed to regional and remote Australia, and as this report shows, the effort has been more than repaid with beautiful art and craft, and the survival and thriving of a culture.

5.5 Mrs Beverly Knight, State Chairman of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Commercial Galleries Association, highlighted the importance of supporting urban Indigenous artists along with remote ones:

I have read most of the submissions on the website, and the urban or city based Indigenous issues are really just as important. I think you can get very bogged down with the remote communities because they are more in your face, but there are many issues that need to be dealt with in the urban situation as well. There is also a lot of future for urban based Indigenous artists, given the right things.<sup>8</sup>

5.6 The committee was interested in ways in which support is able to be effective in south-eastern Australia, and it is instructive to look at how the work of indigenous artists has developed in that region. There is no common path when it comes to training: some of these artists appeared primarily to be self-taught (Lin Onus, Richard Bell), while others gained training through colleges and universities in cities (Tracy Moffatt, Bronwyn Bancroft),<sup>9</sup> while others were a bit of both (Michael Riley). The things these artists have in common, however, are striking. They all appeared to have experienced:

- the maintenance of links to their Indigenous culture and heritage, often through family;
- strong mentoring; and

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6 Kate Williamson, Lin Onus (1948 - 1996), Art Interview, <http://www.artinterview.com.au/artist-biographies/lin-onus/>, accessed April 2007.

7 Department of the Environment and Heritage web site, *Indigenous Settlements of Australia*, 'Australia: State of the Environment Second Technical Paper Series (Human Settlements), Series 2', Dr Paul Memmott and Mark Moran, Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2001, <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/techpapers/indigenous/distribution.html>, accessed 15 June 2007.

8 Mrs Beverly Knight, Australian Commercial Galleries Association, *Committee Hansard*, 23 February 2007, p. 3.

9 Girls on film: Tracey Moffatt, [http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/collections/documents/t\\_moffatt.pdf](http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/collections/documents/t_moffatt.pdf), accessed April 2007; Designer Aboriginals, Biography, <http://www.bronwynbancroft.com/2.html>, accessed April 2007.

- connection or collaboration with other artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Though their environment and art may often seem different to that of northern and Western Australia, these factors appear similar for Indigenous artists across the country.

5.7 There are established and developing Indigenous arts and craft industries in urban and regional centres where artists and support organisations play an important role in bringing greater recognition of the diversity of Indigenous cultures in Australia.<sup>10</sup> In its submission, the Arts Law Centre of Australia noted that Boomalli, the Indigenous artists cooperative, has been operating in Sydney for almost 20 years supporting urban and rural artists from NSW and that there is:

a growing number of independent Indigenous artists achieving artistic and financial success, and although their work is not from a 'traditional' genre, their connection to Indigenous culture is still integral to their work.<sup>11</sup>

5.8 World Vision Australia's Sydney-based art gallery, Birrung, has been involved in the Indigenous Arts industry for over eight years. The gallery is one of World Vision's projects within its Indigenous (Domestic) Programs department.<sup>12</sup>

5.9 Birrung Gallery represents over 200 Indigenous artists from remote communities in the Northern Territory, West and South Australian regions as well as local urban artists. Surplus generated through sale of art at the gallery is returned to the Indigenous Programs department for expenditure on various initiatives including scholarships for Indigenous students and projects in various states involving issues of health, youth leadership, community development and governance.<sup>13</sup>

5.10 The submission noted that the gallery also conducts a number of projects within the local Sydney Koori community as part of their daily operations, such as establishing a local Indigenous business (Indigenous picture framer) and funding a scholarship scheme for Indigenous students at the University of Sydney, a local public speaking program (Koori Toastmasters) and a youth leadership program.<sup>14</sup>

5.11 However, Ms Herd suggested that:

Economic support of Aboriginal artists in urban centres around Queensland has not been given the level of support or attention that more remote communities have not had this point needs to be acknowledged. There is a strong perception that urban artists have more access to art industry

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10 Arts Law Centre of Australia, *Submission 46*, p. 5.

11 Arts Law Centre of Australia, *Submission 46*, p. 5.

12 Birrung Gallery, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

13 Birrung Gallery, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

14 Birrung Gallery, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

services. This is not the case, many urban artists lack skill, education, financial means and exhibiting opportunities as do artists in remote centres.

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There is already the perception that there is less equality when it comes to funding support for Aboriginal artists living and working in the urban centres.<sup>15</sup>

5.12 The Queensland University of Technology submission suggested that a comparative evaluation of the capacity and critical issues of urban Indigenous artists and those living in remote communities be undertaken to ascertain if the concerns and issues facing both sets of artists are similar or dramatically different and:

[i]f they differ, are there equivalent policy settings that capture and account for these differences under the rubric, "the Indigenous visual arts sector"?<sup>16</sup>

5.13 The committee was disappointed about how little evidence it received about urban Indigenous art and artists, and how these can be fostered. However, it was aware that many of the figures central to Indigenous arts today began their careers or received valuable mentoring through urban Indigenous art organisations such as Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney or the Campfire Group in Brisbane. As well as the artists mentioned above, these include figures such as Brenda Croft (senior curator at the National Gallery of Australia, trained at Sydney College of the Arts and a member of Boomalli) and Hetti Perkins (senior curator at the Art Gallery of NSW, also a Boomalli member).

5.14 The committee did receive some information from Boomalli, as well as a thoughtful submission from Mr Michael Eather, one of the key figures in the Campfire Group, and the director of Fire-Works Gallery in Brisbane.<sup>17</sup> The history of the Campfire Group highlights the importance of collaboration, mentoring and skills development in the nurturing of urban Indigenous art:

For a time [Campfire Group members] shared a studio space with David Paulson in an old Queensland colonial house in Torrington Street in Spring Hill. Paulson had a wealth of knowledge about painting and sculptural technique that he passed on unstintingly. Richard Bell reminisces that 'Uncle Dave' Paulson was like a 'footie coach' who trained the 'team' in valuable skills and barracked for them when they used these skills to 'take the piss out of the white art system'...

The next initiative of Campfire was to convene the first Queensland Indigenous Artists' Conference. Artists here were conscious that the flourishing of a Central Desert art market was assisted by the presence of

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15 Ms Jennifer Herd, *Submission 47*, pp. 1, 2.

16 Queensland University of Technology, *Submission 9*, p. 3.

17 Mr Michael Eather, *Submission 88*; see also Fire-Works Gallery, <http://www.fireworksgallery.com.au/Index.htm>, accessed May 2007.

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Art and Craft Centres, workshops, advisors and government grants. Queensland Indigenous artists had to get organised...

One offshoot of these conferences was the identification of a need for tertiary education in Indigenous art for Indigenous artists taught by Indigenous artists. Thus began a long community consultation which in 1995 produced Australia's first Bachelor's degree in Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (BoVACAIA) at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, in Brisbane...<sup>18</sup>

Mr Michael Eather was similarly emphatic about these issues:

what strikes me as equally important is concept of professional development & training for artists in order to gain the experience needed to cope with the demands of being a active and professional artist. How do we achieve this outside a tertiary or vocational system? Can we achieve this with existing networks?

More-often this knowledge is acquired simply by experience - by trial and error and time spent working within the 'industry'. For artists it seems critical to gain this knowledge and experience as well as the skills needed for making art and then understanding their options for operating within the market place... I believe we need to maximize their skills and understandings, their professional development knowledge and industry awareness if we are to regulate the industry in any shape or form... To move forward we need to take the responsibilities of business management, financial advice and art marketing insights to the coal face and seek the collaborative energies of artists, advisors, agents, gallerists, accountants, secondary market representatives, curators, academics and government monitors.<sup>19</sup>

Reports provided by Boomalli highlighted management, governance and funding issues, and the need to manage these effectively to ensure the sustainability of an organisation.<sup>20</sup>

5.15 In the absence of in-depth evidence, the committee was limited in its analysis and conclusions regarding Indigenous art and craft in major urban centres. However it makes several observations.

5.16 First, the committee recognises that many major funding programs such as the Commonwealth's NACIS scheme (described in the next chapter) are open to

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18 George Petelin, 'The history of the Campfire Group', in Michael Eather (ed.), *Shoosh! The History of the Campfire Group*, Institute of Modern Art and Campfire Group, Brisbane, 2005, pp 9–11.

19 Mr Michael Eather, *Submission 88*, p .2.

20 Frank Panucci and Associates, *Report on Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-Operative Ltd*, August 2003; Incite Management Group, *Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-Operative Ltd Strategic Plan FY203*.

Indigenous art bodies generally. However, it also notes a subtle emphasis on remote areas in much of the documentation and regulation in this area. Examples include:

- The introductory text of the Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan, which states in part: 'Indigenous art centres are building capacity, maintaining culture and generating income and employment activities in remote Indigenous communities... [Art centres] play a vital economic role in Indigenous communities – some of the most remote communities in the country'.<sup>21</sup>
- Guidelines for eligibility for grants, such as those from the Australia Council, which are based on requiring proof of Aboriginality from an organisation registered under the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* or similar legislation, or from a Land Council.<sup>22</sup> There are relatively few such organisations in south-eastern Australian cities compared to in the bush, even though there may be high numbers of Indigenous people in those cities, potentially creating a barrier to participation by urban artists.

5.17 At every level, it is important that initiatives intended to foster Indigenous art and craft are communicated and promoted appropriately to all relevant stakeholders and prospective artists. Current processes, while commendable in many respects, may be contributing to a subtle bias against access by urban Indigenous artists.

### Recommendation 9

**5.18 The committee recommends that DCITA, the Australia Council, and state and territory funding bodies review their documentation and processes for Indigenous visual arts funding to ensure urban Indigenous artists will not be discouraged by the language or objectives expressed for those programs.**

5.19 Second, a large proportion of the retail and display of Indigenous art takes place in south-eastern Australia, and in Sydney and Melbourne in particular. The committee was struck by the silence of most sector participants (with the exception of art centres and their related bodies) on the issue of Indigenous employment in the industry. This was most obvious amongst those organisations that are not Indigenous owned or controlled, and this includes most commercial art galleries, not to mention public art collections. A significant exception was The Rainbow Serpent, which has an Indigenous employment policy for its outlets at Sydney and Brisbane International Airports.<sup>23</sup>

5.20 The committee suggests that this is an obvious, and surprisingly neglected, avenue by which the sector could engage urban Indigenous Australians in the visual

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21 DCITA, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services and Australia Council for the Arts, *Indigenous Art Centres Strategy and Action Plan*.

22 Australia Council for the Arts, ATSEA: Grants: Skills and Arts Development, [http://www.ozco.gov.au/grants/grants\\_atsia/skills\\_and\\_arts\\_development/](http://www.ozco.gov.au/grants/grants_atsia/skills_and_arts_development/), accessed May 2007.

23 The Rainbow Serpent, *Submission 17*, p. 3.

arts and craft industry. This would be particularly valuable given that marketing, business management and accounting skills are amongst those most needed in the art centre sector of the industry. Employment in city galleries would be one path by which the number of Indigenous Australians with those skills could be increased, while simultaneously bringing them into ongoing contact with artistic activity in Indigenous communities, whether urban or remote.

5.21 The committee considers that commercial art galleries whose business is to a significant degree Indigenous art should, with the funding assistance of their industry associations, the Commonwealth and art centre peak bodies, develop Indigenous employment objectives and plans.

5.22 Finally, the committee can only urge that policymakers give more attention to how Indigenous art can better be fostered in urban settings. It acknowledges Ms Herd's observation that Indigenous people in urban Australia may not have the access to artistic training and resources that may be assumed. The committee was not able on the evidence before it to form a view on how this should be addressed. But with Indigenous art being one of the inspiring success stories for Indigenous Australians, as well as one of Australia's great contributions to the world, more effort should go into encouraging the creation of such art in the cities where most Indigenous people live.

