



## **PAPUNYA TULA ARTISTS PTY. LTD.**

### **Inquiry into the Indigenous visual arts sector**

#### **Company overview**

Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd was established in 1972 and is entirely owned and directed by Aboriginal artists of the Western Desert, predominantly of the Luritja and Pintupi language groups. The company, initially based in the Papunya area, has met the challenges posed by the homelands movement in the early eighties, and now extends its operations into Western Australia, (covering an area up to 700km west of Alice Springs). All profits generated through the sales of artwork are directed back to the artists, their families and communities. Each of the forty-nine shareholders receives an annual dividend.

Currently PTA supports more than one hundred and sixty artists across three communities, namely Papunya, Kintore and Kiwirrkura. Papunya is located 240km west of Alice Springs, Kintore 500km west and Kiwirrkura approximately 700km west from Alice Springs, located across the border in Western Australia. The aim of the company is to promote individual artists, provide economic development for the communities to which they belong, and assist in the maintenance of a rich cultural heritage.

The company currently employs nine full-time and two part-time members of staff. It has been self-funded and free from any government assistance for almost ten years. PTA leases a retail gallery in Alice Springs, owns a fleet of four Toyota troop carriers, and has just funded a new art centre, completed in December 2006 at a cost of \$1.2 million. This was also self-funded through company profits.

#### **a. the current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector**

In the last ten years the Aboriginal art industry has grown significantly. Currently the combined total of primary and secondary sales has been estimated to be worth as much as \$500 million annually. At the art centre level, PTA is at the forefront of this growth and has been a market leader in the sales of Aboriginal art from the Western Desert.

## **b. the economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector**

Over the last six years, PTA has funded the establishment of a remote renal dialysis unit at the Kintore community. More than \$1 million was raised in 2000 at a charity auction, organised by the Western Desert Dialysis Committee, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This year, the company made cash donations of over \$200,000, to support the ongoing running costs of the Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation, which is responsible for delivering the service to thirty-one patients.

In November 2005, PTA played a fundamental role in raising over \$900,000 for the construction of a swimming pool at Kintore community. This was done in conjunction with the Charles Perkins Children's Trust and the auction that took place was also held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

These projects are just some of the significant positive changes that PTA has been able to deliver to the community. As well as these major projects the company provides numerous other forms of assistance on a daily basis. Things such as financial support for ceremonies, paying for community funerals and sorry camps, providing sporting equipment and sponsoring sports carnivals, and funding school excursions are all undertaken either in conjunction with other parties, or solely by PTA, on a regular basis. PTA has also assisted the local police station in Kintore with the purchase of a blue light disco.

PTA is involved directly with all sections of the community and is a constant source of financial support. In performing this constant supporting role, PTA is actively relieving the need for the community to rely on government funding, in numerous instances, throughout the year.

The company's ability to provide this assistance and support is currently under threat, as the main artists are being targeted by private operators and the money being generated taken away from the community.

## **c. the overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector**

Over the last thirty-five years the artists and art centre coordinators have worked tirelessly to achieve the company's current position. Artists' careers have been built up over time, and in some cases, have taken over ten years to fully develop and become established in the market place. Since the industry 'explosion' in recent years, the recognised artists, that is those with a high industry profile and whose work sells easily, have become targets for private operators intent on making quick cash and riding on the back of industry success.

There is nothing new about this situation, as it has existed for some time. Today, however, the popularity of work by certain artists has become such that it represents

an opportunity for individuals to make significant financial gain, often at the expense of exploited elderly traditional Aboriginal artists.

With the lack of regulation and industry protocols and with no governing body to oversee industry practices, this exploitation has been allowed to continue and grow. Art centres have been left (with limited support) to defend the industry, which has become increasingly valuable to the artists, their communities and to the Australian government.

There have been an increasing number of people entering the industry with a view to targeting particular artists and encouraging them away from the art centre and the community. Obviously the artists themselves are partly responsible for their actions, but there are many dynamics and, to the artists, seemingly attractive incentives involved. Many artists enter into agreements in goodwill and do so trusting that they will be fairly remunerated for their efforts, while at the same time, being largely unaware of the consequences.

Most popular is the practice of trading completed artwork for motor vehicles. Cars, and in particular four-wheel drives, are a much needed and necessary part of people's lives given the terrain and distances that people travel. Typically, an artist will be encouraged into Alice Springs in order to paint for a 'new' four-wheel drive. First contact with the artist is often made through a younger relative who is easily convinced to bring the artist to town in order to paint for the car that is often waiting for them. Again, it is worth mentioning, that the artist concerned is nearly always elderly, sixty, seventy or even eighty plus years old, as they are the known or recognised painters who have an established market.

Traditionally many vehicles are purchased interstate, obviously cheaper than those available in Alice Springs, and later swapped for completed artwork. At this stage 'x' number of paintings becomes equal to one or more vehicles worth 'x' dollars. Obviously there is great scope for exploitation and unfair trading with people having no real knowledge of what the vehicle is really worth. Apart from people being treated unfairly is also the damaging effect it has on their career. Painting under duress and often supporting a large extended family, artists are encouraged to mass produce poor quality work which later floods the market in known galleries around the country, often in Melbourne or Sydney.

The private operators organising these deals are often from other employment backgrounds other than the art industry, and so have little or no formal training or previous experience. This becomes particularly alarming when considering such issues as the materials being used and related conservation practices, financial transactions and, most worrying, the subject of authorship and artist provenance. This is very damaging to the industry and in particular to consumer confidence.

PTA gives great consideration to fostering new talent and the development of emerging artists. **The current trend of private operators targeting established elderly artists is unsustainable, particularly as most private operators direct little**

**or no effort towards the future development of the industry.** This, of course, would mean outlaying expenses on artists whose work may not return money for some considerable time, and so is not practised. There is a smash and grab mentality among some private operators, who are attempting to make as much from the older population as possible while they can.

Other damaging effects include the displacement of family groups who travel with the artist and live away from the community for extended periods. Obviously people need to travel away from their communities at times, but the production of art in Alice Springs has become the primary purpose for people being away from Kintore and Kiwirrkura. Often family groups of ten or more have been absent for months at a time, as they live a hand to mouth existence in Alice Springs painting for cars. Children are away from schools, those enrolled in CDEP programmes are absent and elderly people and those on medical prescriptions are away from clinical supervision.

At the same time considerable effort is being made by several government funded agencies to provide major infrastructure and programming support to the community. The social and cultural breakdown which occurs when certain community members are in town for extended periods is severe at times, and further stresses the organisations in Alice Springs set up to deal with such issues, which are already unable to cope with current work levels.

#### **d. the current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector**

There is little doubt that many community art centres are in need of additional funding support. Art centre coordinators are often employed alone on remote communities, work longer than average hours per week and perform numerous tasks outside their job description. Anxiety and stress from repeatedly having to apply for funding, in order to cover such things as wages and basic operational costs, inevitably result in resignations and a high turnover of staff. From the perspective of PTA, maintaining trained staff is absolutely essential and hugely beneficial, particularly to staff–artist and staff–client relationships. It is worth mentioning that PTA has had no more than ten managers in its thirty-five year history.

It is often suggested that the people employed in the position of art centre coordinator do not possess the necessary business or financial skills to perform the job appropriately. The reality is that with the standard of wages and general working conditions as they are, the industry could not hope to attract better applicants without first ensuring that the position is better paid, that the future of the position is secure in relation to its funding, and that all necessary opportunities are available for job training in all fields of the industry. For any business to grow and succeed there needs to be money spent on training, marketing and infrastructure. Most importantly, an opportunity needs to exist for close business relationships to develop between artists, coordinators and their interstate markets.

**e. opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct**

It would be beneficial to the Aboriginal art industry if the government were to introduce an industry framework that outlined stricter rules for those working within the industry. A common code of practice and regulation is needed to protect the artists and to ensure that everyone is dealing ethically and legally, and to ensure that the future of the industry is secure.

There is certainly tax evasion being practised among some dealers, with GST, in particular, not being collected on behalf of the government. Logically, any additional tax collected through the tightening of regulations could certainly be used to better support those art centres in need of additional funds.

The government also needs to embark on a campaign to educate the market and make consumers aware of industry issues. People need to know that to best benefit the artist and to support the Aboriginal art industry at large, the best place to spend money is either at an Aboriginal or community owned art centre, or at one of its interstate gallery affiliates. This would suggest that a system of accreditation or licensing is also worth considering.

PTA has recognised consumer education as an essential factor and, along with all interstate galleries related to PTA, has attempted to bring consumers up to date with current industry issues. Many consumers are not aware of such issues but respond very positively when things are explained in greater detail. Often those who previously purchased work without knowing its origins have immediately altered their philosophy and only deal with art centres, or with their referred dealers interstate. Consumers, on the whole, want to support Aboriginal artists and do the right thing by the industry, but, in general, they lack the background knowledge to make an informed decision.

**f. opportunities for existing government support programs for Indigenous visual arts and crafts to be more effectively targeted to improve the sector's capacity and future sustainability**

Any ongoing future programs or funding need to concentrate on the grass roots or art centre level. PTA is a good example of a successful Aboriginal owned business, and illustrates the level of achievement that can be reached if supported over time. As mentioned, close business relationships are essential, and in turn further strengthen market position through client networks. However, this can only exist if the art centre is allowed to survive and therefore actively compete, whether that be as a wholesaler, retailer, or, as in PTA's case, both.

**g. future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets.**

The potential international market is still unknown and largely untapped. As overseas audiences have become exposed to Aboriginal art, the level of interest has rapidly increased. This year, PTA has been involved in very successful international exhibitions in France, United Kingdom, United States, Korea, Germany and Singapore. Whilst five of these exhibitions were selling shows, there is enormous benefit to be gained through non-selling shows in public galleries or institutions. Simply making the work accessible to the general public through an international touring exhibition program increases the exposure of the work and provides a platform to open up and establish new markets.

The internet is also a very valuable tool for art centres, particularly those in remote areas with little or no retail presence. The 'Networking The Nation' program has been very helpful and has assisted remote art centres to establish their own websites. As technology advances, it is important for the art centres to remain abreast of recent developments and be equipped to intergrate any future technological advancements.

In closing, Aboriginal and community owned art centres have often been accused of job protection and of monopolising the industry. Has anyone ever considered that it's basically the only industry that many Aboriginal people have, and therefore isn't this legitimate and justified grounds for protecting something that is at risk of being torn apart?

Those who have worked at the grass roots level, and who are experienced in the field of Aboriginal art, are well aware of what's at stake. The art centre model is one that has proven to be highly successful, and it's the work done through this art centre over the last thirty-five years that has enabled it to return a positive change and improvement to people's lives and communities. No other opportunity has existed which has offered Western Desert people this current level of empowerment and self determination. It has allowed a disadvantaged and marginalised community of people to support themselves, make their own decisions, and improve their own lives.

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