



4 Ganges Street
West End QLD 4101

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Dr Ian Holland
Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr Holland

Further Comments by the Australian Indigenous Art Trade Association to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

I am writing to clarify some points that I made when giving evidence to the Committee by telephone on 10 April 2007. Senator Ian Macdonald asked “.. would you hazard a guess at what percentage of all Indigenous paintings—and I will use paintings—sold from Australia in a year are the work of an ethical agent or wholesaler or buyer?” On being pressed to give a rough estimate I replied that “we [Art Trade] think that overall the market is operating fairly well, and by that I meant in a fair way” and that as a “barbecue conversation piece” I might estimate the proportion of unethically supplied paintings at 10% - the lowest number suggested by Senator Macdonald.

After further thought and after talking to Art Trade Board Members I would like to put a more considered response to the Committee.

It is our view that the proportion of fraudulent or unethically supplied fine art paintings would be much less than 1% of the total number sold through galleries or dealers. Overwhelmingly the problem of unethical behaviour by buyers or dealers, in our experience, happens with direct purchases from artists urgently needing money. Artists frequently find themselves in need of money and are under pressure themselves or from their family to make a quick sale. In these circumstances they will be tempted to accept payment well below a proper market price.

Sales of fraudulent or fake fine art paintings are also rare, in our experience, though there have been several well publicized examples involving Clifford Possum and others.

Sales of fraudulent works do occur on the Internet. For example, I have seen paintings offered on eBay from China which were clearly copies of original works by Minnie Pwerle.

The paintings were offered as authentic Aboriginal art works by an Anmatyerre artist with an implausible name, and certainly were not by not an artist from the Utopia region. The description of the fake works was based on certificates for genuine works by Minnie Pwerle. These paintings were reported as fraudulent several times to eBay but no response was received.

Problems of authenticity or fraud are more likely to occur, in our view, in the mass market for cheaper tourist paintings and manufactured goods market such as didgeridoos and clap sticks. Media reports suggest that significant numbers of these paintings and painted objects are being produced in other countries and then imported into Australia to be sold as Aboriginal art. It was the total of all paintings, including these painted items, that I was thinking of when making my "barbecue conversation" estimate of 10% of total numbers.

I hope that this clarification is useful to the Committee.

Martin Wardrop.

Dr Martin Wardrop

Vice President
Australian Indigenous Art Trade Association