

The artists of Ampilatwatja
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In 1999 on the remote community of Ampilatwatja an art centre was formed driven by the desires of a group of senior women of Alyawarr descent, seeking to find not only a source of income but also a way to express and share with the wider community their sense of belonging; to the “country” of their ancestors and their understanding of all contained within it.

From the very start the ladies of Ampilatwatja developed a unique style of painting, which has now been collected by galleries around the world. They have held exhibitions in all the major cities of Australia as well as London, Vevey in Switzerland, Milan and Paris, New York and Huston.

They have hosted to their community, visits by the director of the National Gallery in Canberra and friends, the Museum of China and many other representatives from countries and cities around the world. Artists, who had never been away from their place of birth, have now visited and experienced the multicultural country we call home.

I have watched with a sense of pride these very traditional women go out into the world and share with an open heart all that is precious to them. I have also enjoyed watching the heartfelt response and the affection and growing understanding of not only their culture but also who they are as people.

In the beginning they were funded by ATSIC and supported by Desart with a small wage for an art coordinator and some operational funding, \$ 40000 a year in total. There was no accommodation for the art coordinator, the art centre was an old building with broken toilets and until last year this was still the case, now the building has been given up to a family with nowhere to live but rough.

As the art coordinator I have camped out in my swag and have done so for many years. Ampilatwatja gave up their funding in 2002 over a dispute with the peak body ATSIC and Desart and have gone out alone.

Just recently we were offered a small gallery in Alice Springs at a very reasonable rent and I busied myself preparing it in time to coincide with the Desert Mob show. I believe, as do the many people whom come to look at the gallery what a valuable asset to, not only the City of Alice Springs but also to the community of Ampilatwatja.

I look after about 87 artists mostly women but I have also tried to include the many men on the community with the carving of traditional weapons and artifacts. We make occasional visits out into country hunting, to keep up the moral of the community. I make and prepare all the stretches used to paint on, from raw linen. I supply all the materials used in the production of fine art; I organize our exhibitions both at home and overseas, write the essays, produce the certificates of authenticity and the biographies, answer our many emails, keep our web site up to date. Often I feel more like a community social worker than an art coordinator.

I keep a database of all painting's produced attend to the accounts, pay all the bills and now run a gallery in town all on my own.

The thing that keeps me foolishly going is the knowledge that without my participation and because of the lack of wider support from the artists, their community and the constant draining of resources. All the efforts hopes and aspirations of this group of Alywarr women to improve the lot of their community and families through art depends solely on me and when I am finished; like the resources it will fizzle and fade away to nothing but a memory.

I am tired and worn out and emotionally drained having to continually step up to the mark, now having built up the reputation of the artists and the considerable value of their paintings the tide of dealers and carpetbaggers waiting to profit for themselves is growing every day, from doctors and health workers to teachers and council managers, and car dealers in Alice Springs.

I have watched the government over the years pour money into bureaucratic peak bodies, hoping they will achieve some stability in art business only to see the money wasted and the people who run these intuitions interested only in collecting a wage in plush air-conditioned offices while on the communities nothing seems to change, and when these peak bodies do fail, I see that the next bureaucratic idea based on knowledge from people who really don't know the first thing about art business, and communities, aim in exactly the same direction as the last good idea that failed.

I know it is very daunting to visit most of these remote communities and it takes years of patient understanding to grasp the dynamics that control and affect the way art business happens but you don't have to be a rocket scientist; just passionate about what you do with a willingness to learn. The failure of art business on central Australian communities has many different reasons, how long will it take for people to understand there is very little unity amongst Aboriginal communities, families and sub groups. This is perhaps one of the most fundamental principles to understand because most of the strategies are based on a unity that doesn't exist; it is not a bad thing but it is something inherent in central Australian Community life and Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal people themselves have to bear a large slice of the responsibility for the dysfunction in both art business and community business they have to be encouraged to build strong businesses and to stop favoring their own small family groups against the wider community, stripping the resources of the group in selfish money grabbing moves that benefit no one in the end. The truth does not have a color and reality, integrity and honesty, is not the property of the white fellas. I have always been successful because I give the artists I work for, feedback without censure based on the plain truth, and leave the choice where it belongs.

I also think the government needs to put more effort into selecting the right people who collect the information it requires in order to make the sound decisions that will achieve the results it seeks.

If the answer to the problems of art business are solved it will go a long way to answering the dysfunctions in communities and the many other problems happening now and in the future. I have given a good deal of my life to Aboriginal art business

and made many sacrifices only to find little support for things that are actually working but continue to see support throw away on ideas and projects which are clearly doomed to failure.

Sadly having reached my end I recognize the need to look after my own family, and myself, the personal cost has been far greater than I ever imagined, as have been the rewards.

In a political atmosphere of rewarding those whom make a real effort to help themselves surly the artists of Ampilatwatja deserve and have proven through their art and perseverance the support needed to fully achieve their goals, but I have to say I will not be surprised to see what started off in humble beginnings with the aim of benefiting Ampilatwatja artists and their families end up, as just another source of income for unscrupulous dealers.

I have witnessed the downfall of Aboriginal art; it's like a spiral that falls in on itself created in the most part by the artists themselves, and seconded by an ignorant art buying public.

Success is measured by the on the wall prices and hype. I look around the galleries these days and seldom find a painting worth a second look.

This is the way it goes in my neck of the woods; an artists starts painting and slowly develops an expertise in form and use of palate and how to work with the different mediums, much of this expertise is handed down. Style is developed by looking at what is popular and selling at the moment and thinking that's what white fellas want; but mostly by money and the amount. Ideas are generated by need or greed and a minimal amount of work involved.

Some examples are Gloria Apetyarr a true artist with an abundance of talent who developed her leaf pattern, quickly taken up by Barbara Weir and exploited and any day you walk through the mall in Alice Springs now you will see a dozen artists hoping to cash in on Gloria's design; a few scattered brush strokes on a black background an hours work at most.

Minnie Apwerl is another example who almost overdid herself so much people in the know are asking "Did she really do all those paintings" managed by her daughter Barbara Weir she could be often seen in all the worst galleries in Alice Springs. Since her death all the galleries have been hiding her paintings; not out of respect but in the hope the rumors will die down. There is not one artist I know whose work got better after they started to earn big money. I get a little sick of hearing the same excuse of extended families and their demands as the only excuse for poor work. If the general public weren't so ignorant very little of this stuff would ever get off the ground. Most of the galleries opening these days are just hoping to cash in on what has become a lucrative scam.

I read the Nicolas Rothwell article October the 17th 2006 about the new model of John Ioannou and Agathon gallery and on the surface there is little I could add except to state the obvious. Into whose pocket will the lions share of the money go, and when all the undiscovered artists have dried up where will he go and will the hype and his ego and tight jeans still fool the general public; because if money were the answer for

indigenous people and indigenous art why is there so much crap being produced by artists who make tens of thousands of dollars and just continue to paint stuff I wouldn't hang in my toilet.

I say it again, Aboriginal artists have to take a full share of the responsibility and stop the practice of ripping each other off and everyone else in the name of guilt and look to the future instead of the, me and mine of the present. Being politically correct has never meant to twist the truth; I thought political correctness meant to be compassionate and understanding and respectful not hiding the truth because you were afraid of the anger of a fringe element. Our past generations have a lot to answer for but not for the quality of Aboriginal art; I have witnessed that happening of its own accord by Aboriginal people who want to cheat themselves and their culture heritage.

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