

## **Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector**

### **Introduction:**

My Name is Ian Plunkett. I am co-director of Japingka Gallery in Fremantle, Western Australia. Japingka Gallery is a founding member of ART.TRADE (the National Body for the promotion of ethical dealing in Indigenous Fine Art) and I am also the current national President of ART.TRADE. However, I am writing this submission in my role as a director of Japingka Gallery.

### **Background:**

Japingka Gallery had its genesis in the early 1980s with the formation of the company Desert Designs in what was then an unique collaboration with Indigenous fine Artist, Jimmy Pike. Desert Designs and Jimmy Pike went on to achieve National and International success and recognition with its fusion of Western Culture and Indigenous Design. This was a very successful collaboration which led the Directors of Desert Designs to recognise the need to take the art and culture of Indigenous Artists to a wider audience with the establishment of Japingka Gallery in 1995.

### **Major Issues:**

Japingka Gallery has since gone on to establish itself as one the premier Indigenous Fine Art Galleries in Australia with an extensive and full Exhibition programme. This year alone, Japingka Gallery has mounted eight exhibitions in conjunction with Community Art Centres, with the remaining Exhibitions being sourced from either individual Artists or private art dealers.

Japingka Gallery obviously strongly supports the work of Art Centres, but we also respect the Individual Artist's right to freedom of choice and as such we are concerned at the recent development of a push by a vociferous and influential minority that is actively lobbying against and impugning artworks that are sourced from outside Art Centres.

Firstly it should be understood that Art Centres are an essential part of the success of the Indigenous Fine Arts Industry and indeed, their unsung work and commitment to the ongoing success of the Industry needs to be recognised. We believe that Art Centres are woefully under-funded. Their contribution to the Industry is much more than just the production of artworks but also encompasses tireless support and education of the artists that they represent. Many Art Coordinators are on call seven days a week and provide advice and assistance to the Artists in every facet of their lives and with regard to their dealings with both Government and the Commercial sectors.

I understand from discussions with Desart CEO, John Oster, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to fill all Art Coordinators posts within all the remote Communities and this is due in large part to the current salaries being offered for these posts. Salaries need to be increased not only to reflect the complexity of the position, but also to attract high calibre personnel who posses the wide range of artistic, administrative, marketing and counselling skills that are required to fulfil this demanding position. I believe that the current under-funding has lead to the recent disturbing

development of the appointment of a private Gallery operator to the official position of Arts Coordinator in the remote West Australian Community of Irruntju. (See page three below).

With regard to the Arts Centre vs. Private Gallery/Dealer argument, there are several factors that need to be taken into account:

1. All sectors have a vital role to play in the promotion and marketing of Indigenous Fine Art and each sector has its own contribution and skills to offer. As long as all dealings are controlled by a Code of Ethics and Practise that is actively supported and promoted by the Government, then the argument regarding one vs. the other is irrelevant, it simply offers more choice and options to the Artists. Each sector needs to recognise the different skills that each brings to the Industry and that they need to work together and respect each others contributions rather than denigrating the others contribution.

It would be beneficial if an Annual Industry-wide Forum could be held that encouraged all sectors to meet face to face to address any issues or conflicts. The current practise of denigrating each others contributions in media only harms the Industry and the very Artists that they represent. It would be better for the Industry if differences could be successfully dealt with in this forum rather than the media as all ethical participants share the same goals for the future viability of the Industry.

Most practising Artists do paint for both sectors already and some of the reasons are as follows:

2. Many Artists do not belong to or have access to an Art Centre. The strong artistic talent and fame of the Artists from the Utopia region is a case in point

3. Indigenous Artists must have the same freedom of choice as other citizens in Australia and should not be bound to one employer for the rest of their lives if they choose otherwise of their own free volition. Anything else would amount to "Restraint of Trade". The proviso being that the Artists are protected by a universally agreed Industry Wide Standard of a Code of Ethics and Code of Practise that provides them with protection from unscrupulous practitioners.

4. Many artists have been and still are voting with their feet to paint not only for their Community Art Centre but also for private dealers with whom they have a good relationship. Too many people claim to know "what's best" for Indigenous Artists. This unenlightened attitude obviously runs the risk of being patronising and assumes that all Artists do not know the value of their work when clearly, the vast majority do. It has been my experience, that when artists are asked to paint for a price less than what they know that they are worth by an unscrupulous dealer, they will usually produce what the Artists themselves term a "Rubbish Painting". Usually the inexperienced dealer will not know the difference as all that they know is that they have procured an artwork by a well known artist. However, the existence of such inferior paintings in the market place also harms the Artist's reputation.

5. Sometimes there can be a clash of personalities between an Artist and the Coordinator that means that the Artist would prefer to ply their trade elsewhere.

6. Art Centres are very rarely in the position of being able to buy paintings up front. This often means that an Artist will not see any money for their work until the painting is sold. This can sometimes mean that an artist does not get paid for six months or more. When I met with the Hon. Senator Rodney Kemp (Minister for the Arts) in May of this year in my role as President of ART.TRADE we argued strongly for more funding to be made available for Art Centres so that they can compete on an even playing field and be in a position of being able to buy paintings up-front.

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7. Artists need to be canvassed individually to ascertain exactly what they would like and expect from their Industry. There are many people speaking on their behalf, but this does not always reflect what the Artists actually want and this is evident in their actions. I believe that it is essential that the Senate Committee make the time and resources available to go out into the Communities and to speak to these Artists. This holds true for urban Indigenous Artists as well.

### **Industry future and Sustainability**

I am extremely confident for the future of Australian Indigenous Fine Art both nationally and internationally. Our meeting with Senator Kemp made it clear to us that he saw the Indigenous Fine Arts Industry as a success story in an area that has suffered many failures and abuse. We also share that view. On the whole, the Industry is working well and like Senator Kemp we also support a multi tiered system rather than the "single desk" mentality. Indigenous Art is easily the main source of independent income for remote Communities. It is also an area of pride, respect and independence. It allows many individuals to be self sufficient and reinforces their position of respect within a Community. It provides a positive role model for younger people within a Community and provides hope.

NAVA is currently working on a Code of Practise for which they are consulting extremely widely and I await their recommendations with high expectations for the future. However, Melbourne City Council has adopted a practise of only recommending Art Dealers and Galleries that are ethical and Members of an organisation (such as ART.TRADE) that actively embraces and promotes a Code of Ethics. However, that is just one aspect. Artists need to be given access to commercial training and a basic understanding of their rights within Western society.

The Government should be seeking to promote Indigenous Art in a similar way to Melbourne Council by educating and informing both international visitors and locals alike to seek out only those Galleries and Art Centres that are committed to ethical practises.

### **Remote Communities**

I have also noted that several people are speaking of the need to close remote Communities as they are "unviable". This would be a huge mistake. It would simply shift the problem to the urban centres and displace many people and remove their intrinsic connection to their Country. Indigenous Artists inspiration comes from their inalienable connection to their land. To remove them from this connection would be a grave error that would lead to hopelessness and despair.

### **Private Art Coordinators**

The recent development of a private gallery operator being appointed to the Irruntju Community Arts Coordinator role raises many questions as to the future development and health of remote Communities. As mentioned above, a coordinator's role is demanding and many faceted and encompasses a lot more than just producing and marketing of artworks. The Coordinator is expected by the Artists to provide ongoing support and advice on a daily basis. Clearly where a Private Gallery is not based within a Community, then a fly in fly-out option can not replace the assistance and support of an unbiased and committed fulltime government employee appointed by the Community.

This new development also raises questions with respect to conflict of interest. An important element of a Coordinators role is to market all the artists in the Community to as wide an audience as possible and to promote each Artist in such a way as to enable their ongoing development and for each of them to reach their full potential. A private Dealer will usually have a conflict of interest in that their own business will probably come first and they will be tempted to "cherry pick" the best artists as they are more commercially viable.

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Where does this leave the lesser known developing artists? The Gallery operator may also face problems with regard to mounting and marketing Exhibitions to as wide an audience as possible so as to benefit the Artists as they would need to be dealing with and providing artworks to their competitors. I believe that they would also be tempted to choose the best works for their own gallery which again may not be in the best interests of the Community.

This development needs to be monitored as it does set a precedent that may be used as a model for other operators. I also respect the fact that this option was chosen by the Community and is their choice. Time will tell if it is viable.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it should be noted that whilst the unethical opportunists make all the headlines, the vast majority of people within the Industry are committed to the long term future and sustainability of the Industry and to the culture behind it. The minority can harm the Industry and the public's confidence in it, so it is important to adopt a National Code of Ethics and Code of Practise and to heavily promote those people and organisations who adhere to these Codes to the Art buying public both at home and overseas. These Codes should also accurately reflect what Indigenous artists actually want for their Industry.

Ian Plunkett  
Director – Japingka Gallery

**J A P I N G K A**  
INDIGENOUS FINE ART GALLERY

47 High Street Fremantle Western Australia Telephone (08) 9335 8265 Fax (08) 9335 8275  
Email [japingka@iinet.net.au](mailto:japingka@iinet.net.au) [www.japingka.com.au](http://www.japingka.com.au) ABN 81 009 276 233