

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am presently in the USA on a promotion and sales trip of aboriginal art, and had been meaning to put a submission into the committee prior to leaving, however due to a very big workload was unable to do so. Please find some relevant comments that may help. I have not included any reference to our financial information as I don't think it is necessary for the public and our business opposition to know this. I am however prepared to divulge certain aspects to the commission provided that it is kept confidential and not made public in anyway.

I have also attached question & answer one of my recent submission to the NT Telstra Business awards which we were a finalist in. This attached document will give you some idea of what we are about and how we operate.

I feel sure that this submission will also generate positive ideas and hopefully be thought provoking for members of the committee. I am certainly prepared to answer any questions that may arise.

Comment 1. Artists payments. (I'll address this first as it seems to be paramount in people's thinking.)

Naturally I'm not privy to other organisations, dealers or galleries but the following is how I look at it within Mbantua Gallery.

We have been dealing with the people of Utopia for 20 years. And the last 16 - 18 in particular, have built up a terrific rapport and purchase a lot of artwork. Our system works well, and both the people of Utopia, ourselves and our customers have benefited.

It basically works like this:

- I try to hard to find a win, win, win situation. That is, the artist is happy, we are happy and the end consumer is happy. To me this is the key element and not always easy to do;
- We pay upfront for all work, and are usually working with the use of an overdraft or bank loan facility of some kind;
- We commission work on a weekly or fortnightly basis to a great deal of people. (We have over 200 different artists on our books - but all don't paint regularly, although many do)
- In short, we have standard prices for various people for standard work. For any special pieces, I will nominate a price to the artist and they can either accept it or put a case to me for more. Usually most accept my offer. Sometimes an artist will put a case back to me for a different price, which I will consider and sometimes agree to. I also reserve the right to reject the piece if it is not up to standard or where it has been hurried, and I also will pay more for the piece if I think it is beyond what I expected.
- We also provide all canvas, paints, brushes etc free of charge to the artists;
- We often give advances when a need arises;

- When deciding price I have to take quite a lot into consideration, and that includes:

1. What can we sell it for? Can I sell it? And seeing that the majority of our sales are wholesale, this is the price I fundamentally look at. I also have plenty of competition by "fly by nighters" who pick up bits of art from time to time (often our canvas - see below) and head interstate and sell to outlets we regularly supply. Unfortunately some of these outlets are very price conscious and will buy from them;
2. What are our gallery overheads? (Approx. \$4K every day of the year, not including the cost of product);
3. A large proportion of paintings don't sell. (It is our policy to nurture artists, so we give out a lot of canvas and paints on a very regular basis);
4. Some artists will sell our canvases to unscrupulous dealers that visit in our absence. They also sell to various Government workers, contractors etc who visit the district;
5. A good many of our artists are very loyal, but want to paint on a regular basis, which I think is terrific, so we keep them working all year round but as a result we have to carry the work - often for extended periods of time;
6. A lot of work never sells.

So the payment to the artist is in no way the cost of the painting.

Other Galleries - I usually don't comment on other galleries because it is none of my business but I do read/hear that some say they pay the artist 60% and retain 40% on a commission basis. I know that this happens in many non indigenous galleries, but I find it hard to fathom in indigenous galleries. In a non indigenous gallery, if the painting doesn't sell in a certain amount of time the painting is returned to the artist. Galleries that sell indigenous art are certainly no different. ie quite a lot of the paintings don't sell. What happens to those paintings? I can only imagine that it goes back into storage and the artist is told it hasn't sold. If this is the case does he get nothing for it??? Perhaps something that could be clarified. But various communities/dealers that operate this way would have different procedures I would think. I would imagine that many paintings from communities/dealers who operate this way would sell both wholesale and retail - so what does the artist actually get? Is it 60% of the retail or wholesale? Or is it some other equation? What if a painter say, paints 5 paintings - 4 of them don't sell and one sells wholesale (say 40% under retail for example) what does the artist get? Again different communities would have different policies I would imagine.

Why I have raised this is because I am aware that various managers of art centres regularly state that the artist gets 60% of the sale - and that sounds great! - but they never elaborate on this. Many of these people then go on to attack the private galleries in a general context. When they have the right journalist, all private sector galleries get a caning! Why is this?

Also I believe, and I could be wrong but don't think so, many community art centres receive government funding. Many also go broke. And there are many reasons for this.

And this is not to say that people running these centre's aren't good people, and people who mean well. They are usually run by people who have good intentions, a love

for the art and the people, but lack the administration and business skills that must go with it. And then all of the private sector is blamed when it goes wrong!

Comment 2. Sustainability of the sector.

This concerns me in some regards and some valid points are:

- If there is a downturn in the economy, one of the first things people do is stop purchasing art;
- there seems to be a concentrated effort across the States to introduce more Art Centres. My concern here is that a glut will occur (if it hasn't already). Perhaps a more concentrated effort be made in the introduction of other native industries. For example, a real effort to farm and market native foods such as bush bananas, bush tomatoes, bush plums etc. Also the crested pigeon (commonly called the top notch) could be farmed in lieu of the quail. Dr David Suzuki, (a world regarded environmentalist had been recently recommended to visit our gallery and booked an hour appointment but stayed 2 hours), discussed with me the potential of this market and stating the obvious. That is, this all grows so naturally here in the present environment, why aren't we harvesting it?? This is a great statement. A couple of pockets are, but shouldn't we be looking seriously at a much more saturated level (this could eventuate into a sustained world export because it is food!). Aboriginal communities in outback Australia are in the prime location to do this. But will require smart government assistance to be successful in my opinion.
- I honestly don't think the Federal Government does anywhere near enough to promote the art overseas (and this is not a political statement but rather an honest one). Our gallery has been travelling overseas for the past 6 years now on our own initiative to promote the art (and this benefits all galleries). It is hard work to be quite honest, and I might add that this gibberish you read and hear about paintings "bought for \$100 and sold for \$10000" is absolute rubbish. It certainly is with us!! The intelligence of our overseas counterparts should not be under estimated, nor should the ethics of us be under stated. It just doesn't happen. Certainly with Mbantua anyway. And I as the GM wouldn't want it to happen in that way in any case. Dr Sally Butler, an Art Historian at the University of QLD, recently did a work study in Europe which involved the knowledge that Europeans had of Aboriginal art. She was quite dismayed as to the lack of it. I am sure that she would be more than happy to elaborate on this.
- I don't think the endeavours of the genuine private sector should be understated in the promotion of this industry. They put in a huge investment both dollar wise and energy wise. They are also not subsidised apart from the export grant scheme that some participate in. They have to do it off their own initiative. The genuine ones are also committed for life so to speak. We certainly are! But for some reason we still have to battle against innuendo and false accusations from various sectors who invariably have never met or spoken to us!! This, in light of the fabulous rapport we have with the artists of Utopia!
- There are people in the private sector that genuinely disturb and irritate me. Those that don't have a genuine commitment to the industry, and I honestly

don't have a lots ideas as to how to deal with them . These people include: people that purchase our canvases from artists who we supply, government and private sector people who visit Utopia and buy our canvas and/or "momentarily deal" with our artists with no long term intent, those who only deal with "high profile" artists and aren't prepared to nurture the industry (and there are plenty of those), those who download images from our website (and no doubt other websites) and use those images to promote their own business - these are people I become highly suspicious of (but can't prove) for unethical practises (why don't they take there own photo's or at least ask our permission to use our photos).

Comment 3. Cultural significance.

- In my opinion this art has become a bridge for people to learn about the Aboriginal Culture (this is so important and not enough emphasis is put on it). Mbantua Gallery have taken this very seriously and has built and put a together a 440 square metre cultural museum in Alice Springs. We also have plans in place to build a conference centre that we hope will be utilized by various groups both indigenous and non-indigenous;
- In the year 2000, Lindsay Bird Mbitjana, (a good friend of 15 years to that time) came to my office in Alice Springs and gave me 2 churinga stones. This was completely unexpected and caught me off balance. I asked my accountant (with Lindsay's permission) to come into the room while Lindsay explained why. In short he explained that he was worried about who would take over the leadership of his community if something happened to him and secondly he very much wanted the world to understand his people and culture. He explained to us what the stones represented and asked us to show people with just one stipulation - that we didn't show aboriginal women who still live the traditional life. Lindsay himself later accompanied us to Sydney to a Young Presidents University and explained to a large group, about the meaning of the stones. (Two other aboriginal artists, Ada Bird and Barbara Weir had to leave the room).

These 2 stones are still in my possession on the insistence of Lindsay. But on that day I accepted them on a custodial basis only.

The point I raise here, is that there is a strong desire (certainly through the art) amongst various traditional aboriginal people, for the outside world to come to a better understanding of their culture. And another example comes to mind, when a few years ago Nancy Kunoth Petyerre (a senior lady in her seventies) nearly passed away through sickness. She became hospitalised for quite sometime in Adelaide. After she returned to her home at Mosquito Bore Community at Utopia, she took quite some time to regain her strength. On one occasion when I visited her, she said "Timmy (she calls me Timmy) I can't die yet, I have to keep painting my story for the world!" That was a statement that has forever stuck in my mind, and is indicative of the general desire for these people to have the outside world learn more about there story.

Having said that, there may well be areas who don't want to do this or aren't ready for it, and that's fine too. However for those regions/groups etc that do, then I think that they should be supported in more constructive ways.

- I was disappointed in the breakdown of the Respect Our Culture (ROC), through I believe lack of funding, program that was being put into place by ATA. I thought that this was great initiative and certainly went along way toward recognizing and making public those organisations that met high standards. Being accepted under the ROC banner in itself was a good indicator to the general public as to who to deal through.

Comment 4. Strategic Opportunities

- Partnerships between reputable private sector galleries and communities could work immensely in some areas. These galleries can bring the professionalism needed on the marketing & business side of the union (and much more). In Utopia for instance, there is no art centre. There have been various people employed to run them in the past, but they have all moved on for various reasons after short stints. There was an art centre built but it has now been vandalised and is in ruins. I have had preliminary talks with different senior members of the community out there, and there certainly is a lot of enthusiasm and interest in us and them amalgamating. Our commitment to the future, our knowledge, our expertise and the infrastructure that is in place is quite substantial. And of course the artists have much to offer with their unique skills and culture. I can certainly discuss much more on this if required.

Comment 5. Art Authentication

- Much has been said about this over the years and all have their individual ideas including us, who I think started the procedure of photographing paintings with the artists. We still do this, and find that although it is not foolproof, it does at least identify the painting with the artist. Why we started this procedure was because in my early stages in this business (mid to late eighties), certain artists would bring paintings to me to purchase, which I often did. They would state that they painted them, and in those very early years I wasn't overly aware of their style, so would take their word for it. Often, with one artist in particular, I would be told later on by persons more knowledgeable, that it was not his work. So I introduced photography. This didn't stop this particular artist though, but I did stop purchasing anything he brought me because of it.
- Various ideas have been thrown around in relation to authentication over the years, and no definite procedure has been put in place that would govern all of the industry. I have no doubt this will stay the case because there are so many different bodies within the industry, and even if there was a sound idea, some bodies on principle wouldn't support it. Our gallery, after much consideration on the case put to us, have decided to support IdenteArt for the future, which now has a number of investors in it, including CSIRO. For more in depth information on this J. Weatherby-Wood can be contacted.

I am of course available, and more than happy to make further comment or answer further questions, should it be required.

Yours faithfully
Tim Jennings
General Manager
Mbantua Gallery