

## AUSTRALIAN ART MARKET REPORT

### SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE ENQUIRY INTO THE INDIGENOUS VISUAL ARTS SECTOR

Dear Senators

The Australian Art Market Report magazine has attempted over recent years to assist its readership of art collectors to understand the intricacies of the Indigenous Art Market.

Specialist writer Jeremy Eccles has often emphasised the need for buyers to demand transparency and be aware that the relationship between artist and the marketplace where a transaction is occurring may include exploitation without such transparency. Though this should suggest the need for an ethical factor in such dealings, we believe that there may also be a quality issue which could seriously effect the long-term market for indigenous art in a situation where an artist is living away from his or her community arts centre or regular dealer, off country is subject to the intensity of pressure from family or trader to complete a certain number of works. We see every reason to support the submissions of people like Prof. Jon Altman and Art.Trade in calling for better resources for community art centres, while acknowledging the freedom of artists to choose a different way of bringing their art to market, as long as this relationship is both equitable and fully transparent.

With that in mind, AAMR is happy to submit two relevant articles by Jeremy Eccles: "Bagging Out", from Spring 2005, and a follow-up, "Now who's bagging out whom?" published in Autumn 2006.

#### CARPET-BAGGERS (July '05)

It all started with the sale of a Tommy Watson canvas at Shapiro's in March. It sold for the substantial sum of \$36,000, though the top estimate had been just \$18,000 – a reasonable amount, perhaps, since neither Watson nor his community of Irrunytju had ever been heard of before the middle of 2003. However, the unknown artist had topped \$36,000 at the Cromwell's charity auction which launched Irrunytju; and he had, just days earlier been highly commended by no less a judge than Brian Kennedy in the Telstra Prize General Painting category for 2003.

In fact, he was the star of a highly impoverished community of 150 odd people, way out in the desert where WA, SA and the NT meet. So, when the relatively new art coordinator there, Mary Knights heard of the sale, she was outraged. For this wasn't a painting that had been sold through her organisation for the benefit of that community. It had been sent to Shapiro by the Red Sand Gallery in Alice Springs, with which Irrunytju had no relations. What's more, Shapiro had another; and Red Sand was said to have a pile of Watsons, which it was busily advertising with full-page ads in /The Australian Art Collector/.

It doesn't sound too terrible. Surely a mature artist has the right to sell his work to the highest bidder; and that bidder (Red Sand) has the right to try to establish a price for this product by putting it up for auction. Of course, it's unusual for an auction house to take a work “with the paint still wet” on to the secondary market, sourced directly from a gallery rather than a private buyer. But it certainly isn't unknown in the Aboriginal art market, which has grown at a speed of light since Sotheby's were still calling it Tribal Art in the early 90s.

Nevertheless, fellow auctioneer, Adrian Newstead of Lawson Menzies delicately distinguished between “unethical” and “unseemly” in describing Shapiro's action. Shaun Dennison of Christie's assured me that “Christie's don't operate like that. The Tommy Watson case gets to the heart of the sourcing issue – and we believe that the best Aboriginal art always comes from community-based work”. And long-standing Melbourne dealer Beverly Knight was “surprised by Shapiro's accepting the painting. But then the best commercial galleries are there to nurture their artists and clients, while auction houses aren't there for the artist”.

Mary Knights from Irrunytju was blunter : “Shapiro was undermining the relationships developed between art centres and commercial galleries, which undermines the stability and viability of art centres”.

A sad truth about the Aboriginal art industry is that one of the greatest contemporary art movements in the world is constantly undermined at home by distrust and disparagement between its (mainly white) factors and facilitators. It was something I attempted to pinpoint in a 1998 documentary, /Art from the Heart? - /where the sheer distance between harsh deserts and suave cities was observed. It was not a popular message. But then no one in the industry really seems to like anyone else – and 'carpet-bagger' is a favourite term of insult that particularly plays up the gulf between the art-trained galleryist and the rough bushy, who may well have spent a whole lot longer actually among Aboriginal people.

So Nathan King of the Red Sand Gallery is a carpet-bagger in most urban eyes. He's identified a star artist, 'stolen' him from his community, get him churning out probably inferior paintings – rushed, lacking spiritual intensity – in a bleak back-room in Alice, and will have underpaid him by the 'principalled' standards of established capital city galleries. Oh and King “trades in art as a commodity” according to one established dealer – admitting that she had known of him for 20 years. That's the theory.

But how do the Nathan Kings of the world actually fit into this dysfunctional picture? I talked to Adam Knight – there are a lot of Knights in this story! - himself identified as a carpet-bagger despite running a \$2m. investment fund for Aboriginal art from Abbotsford in Melbourne. He's classic – brought up in the bush, trading in emus and emu oil, picking up the art on the side to the point where he claims he had a turnover of \$200,000 a year, even before he set up full-time art trading.

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“A lot of it went to well-known galleries”, Knights told me; “if you like, my association was 'cleansed' by getting a Hogarth Gallery label on the back. But I'm the one who's done the hard yards in the bush since I was 4 or 5 (he's 32 now), and I'm the one who's built relations with the artists. I was a pall-bearer at Clifford Possum's funeral – I bought all his kids tuxedos for that – and his daughter Gabrielle paints in my gallery. She supplies nothing but takes home \$600 every day she's there, 50% of the retail price. Gloria (Petyarre) kisses me; and when Ronnie (Tjampitjimpa) gets drunk and demands a car, I supply it. A dealer in a relationship has to do that. I never leave an artist unhappy – I say 'No' rather than haggle with them; 'No, send it to the galleries”.

'They had no idea who Tommy Watson was when he walked into Red Sand Gallery”, Knight continues. “But I can assure you that Tommy told me he won't paint for the community any more. He's got a manager – a woman from his community; and he has 100% of the decision-making. That one sold at Shapiro was awesome art. And he spends his money back in the community – it goes as fast as it comes in. But he works slowly. The old men are never in a hurry – they're telling important stories. Now the women have moved on from helping them to grabbing hold of the art – they're the workers; they've got families to support. They can churn it out”.

Not suprisingly, Adam Knight absolutely rejects the idea that he's a carpet-bagger. “I go off my head when people call me that”.

There certainly are hair-raising stories out there which should make carpet-bagger a real term of abuse. As Chris Hodges of the well-credentialed Utopia Gallery in Sydney says, “It used to be hippies doing the deals for a slab of beer, and Clifford was happy enough to let them put the dots on too! Now it's hard-nosed businessmen doing it – and they're pernicious bottom-feeders. They identify a Tommy Watson, or the latest Papunya Tula star and kick the guts out of the community art organisation that started them off. Papunya are particularly hard-hit because they're in Alice; they probably only get 50% of the possible art from their members”.

Kiwirkurra is about as remote as you can get. But dealers will head out there to cajole artists into Alice to paint for them – either by offering their whole family a trip; or offering the men such blandishments as a weekend with a white hooker. Plus a few thousand. Mind you, Melbourne dealer William Mora tells a story of The Kimberley's Freddy Timms leaving Melbourne with a new suit (Chinese label) and an envelope “containing thousands” which he wasn't to open until he was on the plane. He counted \$300 – and became determined to set up the Jirrawun organisation to protect him and his fellow Gija artists from such rip-offs. But there's a Frenchman who comes over to Alice every year, hires a 4WD and drives around shouting, “Good dollar” to any potential black artist. It was even suggested to me that as senior an artist as Ginger Riley was occasionally paid off in chain-saws rather than hard cash.

No wonder 'free-traders' call the city galleries' approach patronising and paternalistic.

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And how clean were such bench-marks of provenance as Don Holt for Emily Kngwarreye's work and Mary Macha for Rover Thomas's? Holt certainly put paid to any community art organisation establishing at Utopia and sent the CAAMA shop that first gave her canvas bust by offering 'protection' from carpet-baggers on his neighbouring station. Mary Macha continued to bring Rover to Perth to paint at her house even after the Waringarri community art organisation was set up in Kununurra. The record price for an Aboriginal artwork resulted.

“Really, no one is clean”, declares William Mora after observing the scene for 27 years. “But to me the ethical question is a simple one – what was the artist paid? I'll open my books and show you the cheque. But the trouble is there's such a demand these days, plenty of collectors no longer give a shit about the artist”.

#### CARPETBAGGERS FOLLOW UP (January '06)

Talk about stirring up a hornets' nest! My Spring 2005 article attempting to understand the current role of 'carpet-baggers' in the Aboriginal arts industry seems to have stung hornets all over the country. Published at the end of August, there was an ABC Radio /Background Briefing /special a month later, though it added little. There were dire warnings about the dangers of carpetbaggers from the Central Lands Council and the Art Gallery of NSW. Sotheby's and Christie's both foreswore carrying art that wasn't properly community based, though Christie's relented a little later. And Adrian Newstead of Lawson Menzies insisted that after 25 years in the industry, he knew a good 'back-yarder' from a bad one, so could handle “lower standards of provenance than houses protecting an international brand”.

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Terry Ingram in the /Financial Review/ subsequently hailed Newstead for “brilliantly seizing on the undeveloped market in unprovenanced Aboriginal art”. Was that praise?

Oh, and an anonymous person (surely not Nathan King of Red Sands Gallery in Alice Springs?) wrote to defend the privately owned galleries in the Alice in general, and to commend Mr King's credentials in particular. Ignoring my attempts at irony in comparing how carpet-baggers saw themselves and how they were portrayed by high-minded city dealers, it seems the Alice boyos are at least more solid than the community arts 'advisers' who simply spend taxpayers' dollars and run off with “a Troop carrier load of art materials”.

Red Sands had come up because of the sudden appearance of Tommy Watson paintings at Shapiro auctions and in the gallery's art magazine advertisements. They clearly did not come from the Irrunytju community, where Watson had so recently been a star. But my anonymous correspondent claimed that, since I wasn't there, any suggestions that Watson had been 'stolen' by Red Sands and underpaid for his work must be just gossip. “Don't let jealousy, rumours and gossip influence your work”, s/he advised.

And I try not to. So I'm now pretty clear after talking to Tommy Watson himself via his relatives, Jean Burke and Jorna Newberry and dealer John Ioannou, who showed a pretty

fair facility himself in Mr W's Pitjanjatjarra. There were undoubtedly pressures on Tommy as the biggest earner in a new art community that he didn't enjoy; there were also monies he claims had been lost. So the 73 year old artist chose to move 150kms away to Warrakuna/Docker River, where his wife was buried and where he had relatives. Needing a dealer, they walked into the ever-open doors of Red Sands, and painted some 20 canvases. Asked about price, Tommy's words, "He practically gave me nothing for them", seem to mean \$1000 a painting.

But Tommy (and his relatives) both needed money and were not adept at bargaining. They had little idea that Shapiro would collect \$36,000 for just one of those canvases. So of course they didn't "walk out of Red Sands with their painting(s)" as my Alice Springs adviser suggests Watson would have done if dissatisfied. This would have required an unimaginable position of equality between Desert Aborigine and smart white dealer.

And, by the way, Mr W can only manage about 30 metres walking with a stick before he has to sit down – preferably on the electric massage chair which Ionnou has bought him for his new Docker River house. The house has come courtesy of the 60% of prices ranging from \$18 to 55,000 per painting that Tommy took home from his sell-out, first solo show at Agathon Gallery in November. But, call me naïve, I sensed that Watson's greatest pleasure came less from the money than from simply standing in that big white Sydney room surrounded by the glowing colours of his country.

And that's a pattern for the indigenous art industry that Sotheby's and Christie's are going to have to come to terms with. A decent dealer can offer an artist different things to a community arts centre, and it's paternalistic for us in the cities to deny that possibility. On the other hand, it does remain our responsibility "to really ask ourselves what we're buying, who we're buying from and what is the ethics of buying it as well", as Hettie Perkins, indigenous art curator at AGNSW warned on the ABC.

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So it was fascinating to have a series of conversations with Aboriginal (and contemporary) art collector Helen Warn, whose moral hackles had been stimulated by my August article. Her first reaction was that it was nobody's business but her's what she bought. "The arguments you were putting forward looked economically unsophisticated and somewhat arrogant", she began. But then she went to her collection, which she'd idealistically believed had all come from communities. "I'd always thought community before individual artist", she explained. "And I've got certificates a plenty. But when I studied the backs, many had been through dealers. Had I undermined the whole > business?"

After a deal of debate, Ms Warn decided she hadn't. She compared stories of community artists being hassled by drunken relatives as they worked with the protection white organisations like Bidyandanga and Yanda gave their artists; she wondered whether independent artists like Lilly Kelly Napangardi, Dorothy Napangardi and Evelyn Pultara had been "lead astray", or whether they'd "just picked up a bit of European savvy" - and concluded: "Morality's no answer; I can't take on the health of the whole industry. In the long run, those who stand by morality will lose out".

So Helen Warn's modus comes down to the following : if she lusts after a work, then she'll try to buy it if the price is right. But she'll also check the paper trail to make sure that the artist was paid properly. And there's one caveat - "I'm drifting back to my non-indigenous collection because I want to be happy with my art; I don't want to have moral quandries".

PS (as at 27/11/06) - Ms Warn turned out to be incorrect in her assessment of Lilly Kelly Napangardi as an "independent artist". Her community art centre at Mt Liebig (Watuyawanu Artists) believe she was virtually held captive for 4/6 months in Alice Springs by members of her own family who'd received money in advance if they got Napangardi to paint a certain number of works for a particular dealer. She's now been allowed to return to Mt Liebig.