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Secretary
Environment Communication Technology and the Arts
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Canberra ACT 2600

SUBMISSION: to Senate inquiry on Aboriginal Visual Art and Craft sector.

Preamble:

This Submission adds to and includes in full (with minor amendments) the brief Submission made on November 27 by me by email.

I am an individual collector and enthusiast (of 10 years) of Aboriginal art. I have no affiliation to any commercial institution, nor do I trade in art or represent any private or public gallery or institution. I am a member of the AGNSW.

POINT 1:

I believe that this Inquiry will need to take a definite position in relation to the many and varied issues around Aboriginal art that have been reported in recent years (eg, see the well known articles in 'The Australian' newspaper), particularly around reported unethical practice and exploitation of artists (which actually results in the exploitation of consumers too, but no one seems too concerned about them... buyer beware!).

Firstly, can the Senate declare: what exactly is the problem that the Inquiry is addressing?

The resultant analysis needs to state: who is causing this problem?

And the third is: who (if anyone) is suffering as a result of this problem and who is benefiting as a result of this problem?

If the Senate is to make statements or recommendations that are related to a solution/s then it is clearly the case that a problem/s needs clear definition that the solution is intended to address, with criteria outlined that would indicate successful intervention. (eg, how would we know that the exploitation of artists had been reduced or eliminated?)

In the media and in the art networks in recent years there has been plenty of hot air and innuendo so the Senate could play a pivotal role in delivering forthright outcomes rather than adding more air-conditioning!

If exploitation is an issue it should be treated as a commercial crime and a racist one as it is clearly discriminatory on the basis of race.

POINT 2:

My personal involvement is mainly in Central/Northern Australia and I have limited experience with Aboriginal art from other areas.

To give the Inquiry some indication of how I (as one individual) have attempted to educate myself about Aboriginal art, I would like to include the following as programs I have undertaken. This is overall a costly exercise! It is perhaps beyond many people, but has provided great personal benefit. Consumer education is of course a wise practice but cannot be required by law. (Any fool can buy any painting for any amount of money from anybody for any reason at any time. This is part of the 'free market'.)

Qualifications Summary:

Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Studies: Curtin University. (2005)

Previously:

Master of Education (Training & Development): Southern Cross University.

Graduate Diploma in Adult Education: Sydney College of Advanced Education.

Bachelor of Science: University of WA.

Aboriginal Art and Culture programs attended (examples): (1997-2006)

The Ngarinyin Aboriginal Corporation: 'Bush University', in the West Kimberley - King Edward River, Mitchell Plateau, and Wandjina Art sites.

The Yolngu Garma Festival 'Education & Training Forum', NE Arnhem Land, NT.

'Introduction to Aboriginal Art': Continuing Education, Sydney University.

Central/ North-west Australia Aboriginal Art Centres Tour: Didgeri Air Tours - Alice Springs, Yuendumu, Balgo Hills, Warmun, Kununurra.

'Contemporary Aboriginal Art' program - Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

'Papunya Tula Genius and Genesis' Seminar - Art Gallery of NSW.

'True Stories' Kimberley Art Seminar - Art Gallery of NSW.

'Introduction to Culture' - Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre, Alice Springs.

'The Eora People of Sydney' - WEA adult education program.

'Collecting Contemporary Art' - Museum of Contemporary Art.

'Aboriginal Art Collecting' Seminar - Friends of Yiribana (AGNSW).

'Introduction to Pitjantjatjarra Language' - Institute for Aboriginal Development.

'Desart Symposium' on Aboriginal Art Centres and the Art Market: Alice Springs.

Travels (examples):

- Red Centre - some 14 visits over ten years to see Aboriginal art, and numerous 'side trips' to see Uluru, Kings Canyon, the Western and Eastern MacDonnells, Hermannsburg, Haasts Bluff, Kintore.

- Alice Springs to Broome by road - a family trip covering over 3000 klms. of the 'outback' - including the Tanami Desert, Bungle Bungles, Wolfe Creek Crater, Kimberley Gorges, and

visits to isolated art centres at Yuendumu, Balgo Hills, Warmun, Mowanjum, plus galleries in Kununurra and Broome.

It is only apparent to me in recent years just how valuable all that 'personal education' was in order for me to an informed appreciator and collector of Aboriginal art. 'Education' includes travel, geography, history, culture, and art... looking, listening, learning, thinking and reflecting. Cross-cultural education is centred on people not information.

The PIVOTAL role that outback Aboriginal/community owned and operated art centres has played and continue to play should NEVER be underestimated by any Australian.

Any activity that actually or potentially undermines or threatens the continuation of these businesses should be a focus on the Inquiry and should be reported accordingly with forthright recommendations for action, including: legal and policing measures to protect businesses that are vulnerable; resources to lift governance, management, and marketing expertise; artists training in commercial practices; and, seeding funds to develop Aboriginal education programs for the public, including cultural awareness activities.

POINT 3:

Because of growing personal concerns, I recently wrote (early 2006) to all major Australian public art institutions: AGNSW, AGWA, AGSA, SAM, QAG, NGA, NGV, Tasmanian MAG, MAGNT, MCA; to their 'Curator Aboriginal Art' and a copy to their 'Director'.

In that letter I requested their Aboriginal Art acquisition - purchasing and displaying and loan - policies. These are public bodies using public funds and their policies should be public. I asked for their policies and particularly their policy about buying/displaying art from non-Aboriginal owned art centres/sources, as this is an issue recently.

When I didn't hear back I re-sent my letters mid year.

I was very disappointed by our galleries inaction, and wonder about their accountability in this matter.

Results of my letter and request: (without mentioning names)

- A. 2 galleries sent a letter with a brief statement of policy (one was clear, the other a bit vague).
- B. 1 gallery phoned me and briefly outlined their position (but had no specific policy).
- C. All (7) other galleries did not respond.

These results are SHOCKING!

So about 70% of our public galleries seem to think they have no need to communicate their Aboriginal art policies to the public.

Why are they wanting to remain silent?

They also have no collective position on acquiring Aboriginal art, in particular the vexed issue of art centre and non-art centre sources. Why are Aboriginal art curators as a group remaining silent? They seem to be inadvertently or actively contributing to a policy vacuum. To re-state: there is no national Aboriginal art acquisition policy position of Aboriginal Art Curators across the board. This is Australia, 2006!!!

I know of at least one State gallery that publicly states (in a catalogue) the importance of supporting community based Aboriginal art centres but their exhibition includes paintings by artists that were NOT sourced through the relevant art centre. Institutional hypocrisy! Whose interests are being served by such decisions? NOT the art centre, NOT the artist. Now let's see... who does that leave?

I think our public Galleries should be called upon to explain and justify their policies and positions in this matter. Their Boards and Directors and Curators need to let the public know where they stand on the acquisition and display policies of all Australian Aboriginal art.

It seems to me that the concept of 'self regulation' in the 'Aboriginal art industry' has been a complete and utter failure:

- our public institutions hide behind sandstone walls
- gallery bodies (eg, Aust Comm Galls Assn, Art Trade) are noticeable by their absence (yes they do make noise but as vested interests they are impotent)
- individual galleries with reputable managers with integrity always regulate themselves well without the need for imposed rules

POINT 4:

RECOMMENDATIONS for your consideration-

1. EDUCATION:

- a) members of the public: more programs for the public about Aboriginal art that are provided by Aboriginal operated enterprises, conducted in the capitals, in the outback, and online

(Should Educators/programs be certified? That is worth considering but DON'T let them be overseen by Canberra bureaucrats!).

- b) Aboriginal-led art bodies: seeding funds (say \$100,000 each) to organisations such as Desart and ANKAA to quickly engage specialist resources to research, develop, market and present Aboriginal art and culture programs in central and northern Australia.

(These should become self-funding and a new source of income.)

2. PROTECTION OF ARTISTS AND THEIR RIGHTS

- a) law enforcement authorities to investigate exploitation of Aboriginal artists.
- b) a central authority to receive reports of alleged exploitation of artists.

3. PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

- a) all Australian public art institutions and museums to be required to publicly issue their Aboriginal art acquisition/display policies and practice codes.
- b) An open national public seminar/conference to be held within 12 months where all Australian public art institutions and museums are required to state their Aboriginal art acquisition/display policies and practice codes.
- c) transparency of public holdings of Aboriginal art by all Australian public art institutions and museums in order to ascertain if works from non art centre sources are held, and why (in cases where the artists already paint for their art centre).

4. GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES FEDERAL AND STATE

- a) our Government departments – using taxpayers dollars – should have publicly stated Aboriginal art acquisition policies that prohibit the acquisition of art that is sourced unethically, immorally, or where an individual or community may be disadvantaged by the purchase: an auditing process needs to be implemented.

Finally, thank you for the opportunity to make this Submission. I am happy to expand on any of the above points if required.

Thank you.

From: Alec O'Halloran