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I write on the recommendation of Dr. Jon Altman of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. I am an American art collector of indigenous Australian fine art, whose interest in Australia dates back to a chance to see the "Dreamings" exhibition at the Asia Society in New York City during your Bicentennial year. I have travelled to Australia half a dozen times in the past 15 years, visiting all the capital cities and many places in between, including Aboriginal communities in the Top End.

I am the author of a weblog entitled "Aboriginal Art and Culture: an American eye," <http://homepage.mac.com/will_owen/iblog/> and I recently posted a few reflections on the current Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector. I hope you will accept a copy of this review as a belated submission for the Committee's consideration.

I am deeply appreciative of the important work the Committee is undertaking and believe that support for the indigenous arts sector is one of the more effective means of promoting development and indeed justice for a marginalized community in Australia. As my review makes clear, I think that support for community-based art centres is the most critical element in charting success.

Thank you for your consideration.

Will Owen
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Aboriginal Art & Culture: an American eye

Sun - December 10, 2006

THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFT SECTOR

Writing in the December 8 issue of *The Australian*, Ashleigh Wilson has given a brief [overview](#) of some of the issues that have been raised in [submissions](#) to the current [Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector](#). The Inquiry, which *The Australian* is congratulating itself on instigating with its series of articles early in 2006 on corruption in the art trade, has seven principal areas of investigation. Here is the charge:

The Senate has referred the following matter to the Committee for inquiry and report by the first sitting day of 2007:

Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, with particular reference to:

1. the current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector;
2. the economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector;
3. the overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector;
4. the current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector;
5. opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct;
6. opportunities for existing government support programs for Indigenous visual arts and crafts to be more effectively targeted to improve the sector's capacity and future sustainability; and
7. future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets.

As Wilson noted, nearly sixty submissions were received prior to the closing date of November 27, 2006. The report is now due from the Committee on March 22, 2007. The members of the Senate Committee certainly have their work cut out for them. Submissions have come from a wide range of interested parties: art centres and private dealers, collectors and curators, artists and academics, government departments and private contractors. Some of them follow the outline proposed above, some comment on a few of the points only; others take a more idiosyncratic approach better suited to the writer's personal experience and knowledge of a sector of the vast enterprise contained in the study's scope.

I have been working my way through the submissions for almost three weeks now, after being alerted to them by Jon Altman of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR). I'm still not finished reading. It is a lot to digest. Many points are made repeatedly by the various individuals and organizations who have contributed, and the fine and important distinctions can be easily lost in what seems like a flood of information. I hope that all of us to whom the health and success of the indigenous arts endeavor matter will take the time to read and consider each of the submissions. As an inducement, allow me to highlight a few that strike me as being the most eloquent, direct, and worthy of influencing the politicians in Canberra.

Perhaps the best place to start reading is the [submission](#) from Paul Sweeney on behalf of Papunya Tula. It has many virtues, beginning with its lucid prose style: facts are presented clearly and cogently to tell a story of remarkable achievement on the part of the cooperative and to provide an incisive examination of the state of the indigenous fine arts industry. Unlike some of the other essays that have been submitted to the Committee, Sweeney's submission avoids emotionally charged pleas and *ad hominem* arguments, and yet manages to be one of the most powerful and affecting statements in the lot.

Asked to comment on the economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector, Sweeney chronicles the benefits that Papunya Tula has brought to the communities of Kintore and Kiwirrkura: the

establishment of the remote renal dialysis unit; the continuing contributions to its operating costs; the building of the swimming pool at Kintore; and support for community activities ranging from sorry business to sports carnivals. On the issue of carpetbaggers, Sweeney pulls no punches as he outlines the human costs to the artists and their families, the cultural costs of displacing individuals from their communities, and the economic costs of trading short-term profits for long-term development of the industry and the personal development of the younger generation who will sustain both the culture and the commercial activity that is generated from it.

Sweeney also notes the importance of versatile, well-trained, and well-compensated personnel to support community art centres. This is a theme frequently elaborated in other submissions (and not only those from art centres, I should point out). The provision of development opportunities in the form of training in accounting and marketing skills must go hand in hand with cultural training. The issue of education is also one that applies to consumers who "want to support Aboriginal artists and do the right thing by the industry, but in general ... lack the background knowledge to make an informed decision."

What is ultimately most convincing, though, is the record of achievement of which Papunya Tula Artists can boast. As Sweeney notes in his opening statement, Papunya Tula "has been self-funded and free from any government assistance for almost ten years." It is a model for what the indigenous art sector can achieve in time. Having offered ample proof of the cooperative's success, Sweeney can demand our acquiescence to his conclusion:

Those who have worked at the grass roots level, and who are experienced in the field of Aboriginal art, are well aware of what's at stake. The art centre model is one that has proven to be highly successful, and it's the work done through this art centre over the last thirty-five years that has enabled it to return a positive change and improvement to people's lives and communities. No other opportunity has existed which has offered Western Desert people this current level of empowerment and self determination. It has allowed a disadvantaged and marginalised community of people to support themselves, make their own decisions, and improve their own lives.

Brian Tucker is an accountant and registered auditor who has worked with art centres in the Western Australian, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Significantly for much of the ongoing debate about ethics in the industry, he is a member of the Australian Taxation Office Indigenous Tax Advisory Group. Tucker offers clear-eyed and practical [suggestions](#) for government assistance "to improve the lots of those Indigenous artists and others working in remote and often dysfunctional and difficult communities." He speaks a language that ought to be comprehensible and appealing to officials who will be called upon to make decisions on the basis of sound investment and accountability. His submission is, like Sweeney's, an eloquent brief for the importance of the art centre in the economic and cultural life of many indigenous Australians.

Tucker swiftly and vividly outlines the basic economics of art centres: the percentages taken by retail outlets (galleries), those required to keep the art centre itself operational, the return to the artist on his labor. He likewise offers an insightful profile of the individuals who comprise the market: investors, public and private collectors, enthusiasts (presumably including tourists), and advocates for indigenous welfare who see the purchase of art as a means of contributing to "the support and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians." He then goes on to delineate the needs of the art centres, which he see as "the only mechanism by which the cultural integrity of the artists and the economic (or aesthetic) imperatives of the market can be reconciled." His somewhat surprising conclusion--but one which makes eminent sense on a moment's reflection--is that the chief requirement for remote art centres to thrive is adequate housing for the art centre manager. While not denying the importance of painting and gallery space for the artists, he recognizes that "all of this is pointless if there is nowhere for the Art Centre Manager to live, notwithstanding the conditions in which many managers are prepared to live." In concluding these remarks, Tucker notes,

I should also add that, in all the Centres in which I work, if the Art Centre Manager was given a pot of money that they could use to, at their choice, improve the Art Centre or their own living conditions, every one of them, *every one*, would spend it on the Art Centre.

On the difficult issue of ethical practice, Tucker believes in the power of education, for both the artists and the buying public. This is a theme that is sounded in many of the submissions, and is the major

alternative posed to the notion of regulation or a legislated code of conduct. Tucker is not sentimental about this: he understands full well the difficulties faced with educating artists in remote communities whose languages and economies are quite foreign to those of the commercial world. But this admission allows him to return to his dominant theme: that it is the competent, dedicated, and ethical art manager who can best mediate for the artists and protect them from those who would exploit them for personal gain.

Communities can foster growth, not just of a new generation of artists, but of new techniques and new work for the market. Rightly recognizing that "the upper end of the market ... will take care of itself," he urges support for young artists, the inculcation of realistic expectations, and the use of funding based on need to encourage experimentation, exploration, and hope.

The [third submission](#) that I highly recommend taking a look at is Jon Altman's. It is hard to imagine anyone having better credentials for this undertaking. Altman's research began over twenty-five years ago, and he was the chief investigator in the 1988/89 review that resulted in the publication of *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry: Report of the Review Committee, Department of Aboriginal Affairs* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989). Two of his more recent publications on the marketing of Aboriginal art are included as addenda to his submission here. (They are also available on the [CAEPR website](#); if you're not familiar with the site, it's worth spending a few days exploring the wealth of information available there, including the full text of many CAEPR publications.)

Perhaps the dominant theme of Altman's submission is the fact that the indigenous visual arts industry is the single most successful program for assisting and developing the economy in the Aboriginal sector, with a proven track record over the past thirty years. The fact that this needs to be stated so forcefully (as it is in many of the submissions) is in itself more surprising than anything. On my first trip to Australia in 1990, this point was brought home to me by a tour guide who took us through the Western Macdonnells and whose sympathetic and insightful lessons on Aboriginal culture germinated the seed of my interest in Aboriginal art. And yet, as Altman points out, successful art centres are the ones most at risk of having government funding "clawed back." (An exemplary documentation of this fact is available on the web in "[De-funding by ATSIC: Impact on Warlayirti Artists](#)" by Samantha Togni, written in 2003 as part of Desart's submission and response to the October 2002 "Policy Framework for the National Arts & Crafts Industry Support Strategy.")

Altman, too, is a champion of the community arts centre as a breakwater against the incursion of unscrupulous opportunists into the art market.

If operational support to centres is reduced, the impost on artists increases and some of the top artists can be tempted to operate outside their community-based arts infrastructure for better individual returns. While there is clearly artist agency in such choice, artists are left vulnerable to exploitation because private dealers do not have the same requirement to be transparent as incorporated community organizations. State patronage of art centres might be the best means to reduce unethical practice as the required transparency of art centre practice (to artists and funders) is a distinct benefit of public funding.

Altman's report caused me to reflect on how so many of the political proposals currently under debate in the newspapers will undermine the successes that have been achieved in the visual arts sector. The abolition of the permit system will ease the entrance of carpetbaggers into communities. The rollback of CDEP will be especially harmful in remote regions by placing additional economic burdens on the sole non-CDEP source of income. The shutdown of remote communities and outstations threatens to sever the connection to country that is the wellspring of much of the best art. The failure to provide adequate infrastructure, especially in the area of housing, increases social anomie. I have long felt that the government's current strategies represent a return to the discredited politics of assimilation, and that the issues at hand are not truly economic but sociological and ultimately racist in nature. I don't mean to suggest that Altman himself presents this point of view here. But I see warning signs that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Altman's submission concludes with eight lucid recommendations, which I summarize as follows:

1. recognize the success of government support for the arts;
2. recognize the dual cultural and commercial nature of the industry;
3. enforce existing regulatory controls against unscrupulous practice;

4. provide funding for the arts in order to generate broader economic, social and cultural benefits;
5. capitalize infrastructure support for art centres;
6. adequately support the crucial human resources: art centre staff ;
7. promote coordination and streamlining of government support; and
8. make the Senate Inquiry itself a vehicle for widespread public education about the arts sector.

Surely, this is not too much to ask. Altman estimates A\$15 million *per annum* as a figure that would provide adequate support for 100 art centres across the country. Let me put that into perspective. The [annual appropriation](#) for the National Gallery of Australia in fiscal year 2006/07 was A\$63 million, more than four times what Altman suggests for 100 communities. In 2004, Alcan announced an expansion of the alumina processing refinery at Gove. The [estimated investment](#): A\$2.4 billion. To operate on what had always been Aboriginal land until the decision in *Milirrpum v Nabalco* in 1971, the year that Geoff Bardon took up his schoolteacher's post at Papunya.

There is much, much more to discover and ponder in the 58 submissions and other supporting documents available on the Inquiry's [website](#). In selecting out a few documents to summarize, I have admittedly focused on issues relating to community art centres, and to the fine arts segment of the market. There are certainly broader issues at stake here, for example, the effect of the importation of cheap "Aboriginal-style" artifacts and souvenirs from abroad. These ersatz commodities compete with indigenous items and choke off an important and lucrative outlet for craft expression.

The [submission](#) by the Australia Council provides much in the way of raw data on the issues, often helpfully presented in graphical form. There is a strong [submission](#) from the Northern Territory Government that demonstrates the impact Marion Scrymgour is having on discussions of the arts in the heartland of much indigenous production. At the other end of the spectrum, Ali Cobby Eckermann, a Yankunytjatjarra woman who is the Art Centre coordinator at Titjikala breathes life into the [story](#) of one carpetbagger in Alice Springs. Even Peter Garrett has kicked in, although frankly there's more inspiration to had by giving another listen to [Diesel and Dust](#) that by reading his brief here.

What will be the litmus test that the Senate Inquiry results in a significant win for Australia? Perhaps a five-year program that is adequately funded to guarantee the continuance and further fostering of community art centres, with a goal of eventual commercial independence as exemplified by Papunya Tula Artists.

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