



200606323

STOMPING OUT THE MIDDLEMEN

THE PUNKS WHO RIP OFF ABORIGINAL ARTISTS

by Jason Davidson

FROM AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

BACKGROUND

My Aboriginal name from Gurindji country of the Northern Territory ('NT') is Ngulliyangi. My grandparents and family are among the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal people in Northern Territory who were subjected to the Australian Government's assimilation policies. My *Joji's* (grandfather's) country is located near the Roper River, the Limmen Bight region of the NT which includes Ngalakarn, Mara and Bundiyarnng country. My *Jaja* (grandmother) is from Gurindji country in the direction of Inverway, west of Kalkaringi, an Aboriginal town that is formally known as Wave Hill.

I am a contemporary Aboriginal artist and I have developed my own design style by combining contemporary Aboriginal art with new media technology, also known as multimedia. My artwork is now in a class of its own and it gives an insight into the ways in which Aboriginal art and culture is incorporating modern technology.

LOSING TRUST

Whilst I have been developing my academic qualifications and artistic skills I have also developed a lack of trust against the many non-Indigenous people who have been taking advantage of Aboriginal knowledge, cultural and intellectual property, and who have been ripping off Aboriginal artists.

For many years now we have seen many different projects supporting the urgent need to address the problems endemic in Aboriginal art. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have written in important copyright journals, we have heard people talking at important conferences about Aboriginal art and the rip offs, but still the trend continues.

There is a whole list of reasons why Aboriginal artists are being ripped off; it's not based on one or two facts. Could it be because the Indigenous community is not taking enough action to fix the problem or is it because we're sitting back waiting for white people to do the work, fix

everything up and make it all pretty again? Other facts are based on Aboriginal artists in remote communities not knowing who to talk to, who to approach or where to get support from. In urban cities Aboriginal artists have access to support, but back out in remote communities it's a different story...

There is a continuous trend of these white people who travel out bush promising the world – 4-wheel-drives, alcohol, food etc – to Aboriginal artists. People out on communities end up believing them and the art dealer will buy artwork for \$200 and then sell it again for \$6,200. This way of doing business with Aboriginal artists was supposed to be finished long time ago, but it still continues. Why do we have a multimillion dollar art industry yet the money doesn't get back to the artists? They say it's a multimillion dollar art industry but take into account another fact, that our art business is thriving internationally, and it's really a multibillion dollar industry providing lots of jobs and wonderful career paths for many non-Indigenous people.

Ask yourself who is making the big monies from Aboriginal art. We have a handful of successful artists, but many are being taken advantage of.

STOMPING OUT THE CROOKS

Family out bush asked me to help them so they can do their art without the problems of being ripped off all the time. I been driving over 2000 km (5 times in 2005), when I got the time, to catch up with family and other artists to talk and prepare new business that is run by Aboriginal people. I am slowly in the process of starting an online art gallery: Aboriginal Imagination <www.aboriginalimagination.com.au>.

I have been keeping this a bit quiet for almost two years now, and I am finally at a stage where the business is ready to start networking. This business will be set up with the intention of stomping out the crooks who rip off Aboriginal artists.

One the main ways to stomp out these crooks is by promoting new Aboriginal art businesses that have the support of the communities. You need to get locals from their communities to do the business and get things happening; they are the ones who should be working with the artists in their own communities.

Aboriginal Imagination is a new business based on Indigenous people taking control of the images representing their culture; taking control of their media and its production; and taking control of translations of their knowledge systems.

Aboriginal Imagination is also about the diversity of Aboriginal culture and the potential for multimedia technologies to become a very powerful voice for our people.

So why is it that these art dealers seem to think they can put it over Aboriginal artists? We need to start making strong statements that we will not tolerate any more no good business people who are ripping us off; we're ready to fight.

TIME TO FIGHT BACK

Aboriginal people have been tricked; we been made to believe that most of these white people are there to help us because they love us so much. Why are we so patient and trusting to these crooks who give us scrap money for artwork? Then they have the right to do all the big business. Are we really supposed to be happy with being paid small money, enough to be able to put food in the fridge or go off to buy grog? While we're happy with the chicken feed, the big shot art dealer does some flash upgrade to his new Aboriginal art centre. Why do we allow this to happen?

This pattern makes me really worry because it links back to history repeating itself; back in them days when our Elders worked really hard on cattle stations. The government has failed to tell the community that the ones who done all the hard work to get the multimillion dollar cattle industry going were the Aboriginal stockmen who worked for next to nothing. They got the beef industry started and now we got roads, helicopters and boats for international beef exports. It's all happening – a full-steam-ahead multimillion dollar industry that still gives very little back to Aboriginal communities; we're still living in poverty. Can you see the link with art yet? Aboriginal art is going down the same path as the cattle industry.

Aboriginal artists have put so much into it; working hard for little money again. Not much has changed, it's the same kind of profit margin taking place as in the old days. How far does \$200 for a painting go when you go to the shop? You come out of the shop with little bit of food. Rich for half a day.

Artists have been taught that their artwork can bring them \$100-\$400; small money enough to last a couple of days so you end up trapped in a cycle of providing constant artwork for the non-Indigenous art dealer. On the internet right now is artwork one elderly artist sold to an art dealer for \$400 – it's being sold for \$1350USD, this equals almost \$2,000AUD. Nobody told him how his artwork was being sold on the internet.

We're at a stage where we still can't trust. We're giving everything and getting nothing in return; that's not right. This extra struggle will mean more fights in the future where violence is used as a means to get justice because the white man's systems fails to acknowledge what is going wrong. Recent conversation with artists was a bit of a shock; these people are getting more game, greedy and stupid – some of these non-Indigenous people have been making old people sign contracts to paint and when that old person passes away, the so called wonderful trusting art dealer gets to inherit all the artwork that the artist produced. Is it ok for art dealers 'to take business in the areas of old peoples' wills?

Jason Davidson is from Gurindji country in the Northern Territory. He holds a master's degree in Aboriginal Health Education, is in the early stages of his PhD in Information Technology Philosophy and is also an artist. Jason's website can be accessed at <www.aboriginalimagination.com.au>.