

Submission to Senate enquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector:

From Euan Hills, Art Mob, Hobart, 27 November 2006

I have addressed each point in varying degrees limited by my knowledge, involvement, concerns and aspirations for this sector.

**(a) the current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector**

Art Mob is located in Hobart, Tasmania and has been operating since April 2002. Sales over the past 12 months were \$1,945,000 ex GST. This included a wide range of Australian Aboriginal products including paintings, sculptural items, prints, textile items, books and some minor items including cards, journals, etc. These works were sourced from many areas. 25% of sales went to Tasmanian clients, 25% overseas and 50% to mainland Australian clients.

**(b) the economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector**

Clearly this sector injects a large amount of funds into Aboriginal communities and improves social outcomes. It also provides a shop front to the world of the strength of culture amongst many communities and a strong marketing tool for Australia to attract tourists. The repetitive painting of cultural matters strengthens culture within the family and tribal structures providing an important continuance of culture. Art Mob's gallery provides an educational experience for visiting groups - school children, interested adult groups, conference delegates or whomever. The gallery also conducts a free introduction to Aboriginal art class each month.

**(c) the overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector**

I personally am not able to give too much input to sustainability matters but I observe good growth in sales year on year in my gallery and expect it to continue in a strong and positive manner. Last financial year there was an increase of 33% over the previous year following a 100% increase the previous financial year. Similar activity on my web site shows growth in interest. Clearly if my figures are typical of this sector then there are no concerns about sustainability from a financial aspect. As with any indigenous population globally there is a dilution of culture and artistic ability or a shift in content as "assimilation" or whitening of populations occur. The division between what is indigenous and what is "white fella's" work is a difficult line to make and it shifts continually. Art Mob's attitude to Aboriginal art is to suggest to visitors that it is truly Australian art but what is in the gallery has been done by Aboriginal people. Difficulties arise with divisive attitudes in the Tasmanian Aboriginal arena with some saying that certain artists are non-Aboriginal. The Tasmanian Government passed legislation clarifying this matter but socially it seems to be ignored by those with their own agendas. From a supply point of view, I have no problem at all in sourcing any amount of good to high quality material. Art Mob is known for supply of genuine high quality work with a "no nonsense" business approach.

**(d) the current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector**

As with any product marketing the final product creates demand. I personally find it amazing and disturbing that the Howard Government has left it to the French to house the world's best known site for Australian Aboriginal art – the Musee du Quai Branly. There is no equivalent in Australia - a sad indictment of our country's patronizing attitude to what's on our very own doorstep. A high priority should be put on establishing public art galleries to showcase Australian Aboriginal art and educate the masses. The more educated our population is will provide growth opportunities for Australian Aboriginal art. I have a couple of clients who have collected significant art works in recent times who would willingly have their collections on public display if the appropriate infrastructure was provided. Sadly no such opportunity exists here in Tasmania at this point of time.

**(d) 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**

Art Mob is a member of Art.Trade which has its own professional code of conduct. I note that NAVA have been empowered to create the National Indigenous Art Commercial Code of Conduct. I will provide input to this in due course. Surely such concerns that are expressed here should in fact be reflective of all Australian art – not just Aboriginal art. Why segment Indigenous visual arts? To me it smacks of racist and discriminatory attitudes that are rife in our country. Exploitation will happen in any area where money is concerned – not just in Aboriginal art. Generally it is overlooked that our Aboriginal artists are not dumb black primitives – they are sophisticated and highly capable artists who know what to expect for their work and paint accordingly. Poor pay results in low quality work and done with cheap materials. Peter Harrison of Kimberley Art in Melbourne concurs with me that neither of us has bought good art cheap!

I expect that the emphasis on unethical and unscrupulous conduct was initiated by certain journalistic articles published in the newspapers in the past 6 to 9 months and in particular Nicolas Rothwell's article "Scams in the Desert". Clearly he was put up to writing this article by Paul Sweeney of Papunya Tula Artists in Alice Springs. Such emotive and clearly hyped up sensational journalism kills business for those validly representing the Aboriginal artists themselves. I know that Art Mob's business took a nose dive after this article – as did many other galleries across the country. In a similar vein, I had to take Australian Art Collector magazine to task for a clear breach of the Anti-competitive Federal laws where they had colluded with Paul Sweeney to censor potential advertising by galleries who may have wished to use images of Makinti Napanangka's paintings in the issue where Jennifer Isaac focused on this wonderful matriarch of the Western Desert. Such misleading behaviour is clearly targeted at self promotion and creating question marks in people's minds as to what is authentic and what is not. Assumed proprietorial ownership of Aboriginal artists by organizations such as Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd and others causes me much concern. Promotion of the fact that art work is authentic if it originates from community art centres and may not be otherwise is the current scourge of the industry. Clearly authentication can only happen from the artist himself (or herself). Art Mob prides itself in buying work from

reputable sources - direct from the artist, through an intermediary (derogatorily called carpet baggers by many), from community art centres and from other galleries. I see no point in limiting my opportunities through altruistic attitudes in sourcing solely from community art centres but select the best works from across the board.

**(f) 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**

Organisations such as Desart and ANKAAA are valid and useful organizations. Their ability to coordinate and market production is good. Funding of community art centres seems to be somewhat random and probably in response to the amount of “noise” created. What concerns me more is the ability of community art centre coordinators to effectively do their job. For example, Art Mob has been a strong supporter of Warlayirti Artists at Balgo Hills since the inception of the gallery. I have seen a number of different people come and go from running that centre. That centre currently gets no funding but relies on its ability to make a profit – same as my business! Difficulties that I have recently experienced in dealing with that centre were addressed by John Oster at Desart. My real concern is that the real cultural background of each work is recorded and provided with the painting, the provenance is good and that proper business is conducted.

There are many areas where community art centres don't exist and Tasmania is an example. If adequate commercial activity can be generated then there is little need for government support programs. My suggestion is to focus on creating the demand for such art by exhibiting it appropriately. In fact, how many Government offices portray any Aboriginal art? An exhibition that I took to Parliament House, Canberra, in October 2005 sold 1 piece out of 12 to a Victorian senator... The rest returned with me to Hobart. Not even Senator Eric Abetz, who requested my presence in Canberra added any Aboriginal art work to his office!!

**(g) future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets**

Increased funding for purchases of key works for Government institutions will be critical to increasing growth in this sector. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery has no acquisitive funding from any level of government. Its ability to purchase appropriate contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal work in particular is thus clearly limited. As a past trustee of this institution for over 7 years I have good knowledge of how such institutions work. The Aboriginal art shown at TMAG is more of a “museum” display of a very limited number of pieces. I have not sold them a single piece of art since opening nearly 5 years ago yet I have a sensational range of Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklaces... Funding is the issue. If the Federal Government should build something better than the Paris model then international business can only grow. Bilbao in Spain may seem an odd choice for location for a world class museum but does it work? There must be a rural location for creation of the world's best Indigenous Visual Art & Craft gallery somewhere in Australia. Might I suggest Hobart? Perhaps though a better vote getter would be in the Bass electorate at Launceston.

I am available for any discussion on any matters or elucidation of concerns.

Yours faithfully

Euan Hills

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