



LOCKHART RIVER ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ARTS & CULTURAL CENTRE INC.

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Submission to

Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector

Located on the Pacific coast of Cape York Peninsula, Lockhart River Art Centre (LRAC) is unusual for at least two reasons. Firstly because it is in Queensland, a state that has relatively few art centres in remote indigenous communities. LRAC is the only independently incorporated, indigenous community art centre that we are aware of in the state, certainly the only one north of Townsville.

Secondly, LRAC is unusual because the success of the 'Lockhart River Art Gang', as Lockhart River artists are collectively known, is predicated on youth. The most successful artists from Lockhart River are all under 30 years old.

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

Under current management sales have averaged \$750,000pa over the past five financial years (FY '02 to FY '06). As a comparison, sales for FY '01 amounted to \$380,000 and in years before that considerably less. The increase was in part due to a doubling of the exhibition schedule along with the continued rise to prominence of a few artists. The art centre retains 33.3% of the income from art sales, the balance being distributed to the artists. As an illustration of benefits to mainstream businesses, commissions retained by three of the art centre's main galleries over the five years average \$112,000pa, \$60,000pa and \$50,000pa respectively. Only one of those galleries specializes solely in indigenous art.

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

Of necessity many LRAC activities are financially neutral. Bush trips are organized regularly for elders to gather materials for traditional crafts. Major language retention projects have been undertaken. For the past five years Arts Queensland has funded cultural retention and artistic development through its IRADF Fund to the tune of \$15,000pa. In FY '06 LRAC received \$50,000 under the VACS scheme. The Arts Director's position is funded by DCITA under the NACISS scheme.

Sales of crafts and artefacts to LRAC provide a small but important supplement to the incomes of many older women in the community. Financial benefits to artists are uneven, with a few doing very well while others derive more modest returns for their efforts. In the long run, in line with the cultural and family obligations prevalent in aboriginal culture, financial benefits end up being more widely spread around the community than can be accurately portrayed here.

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

It is our conviction that art centres in remote indigenous communities have the potential to become seeds from which more business can grow. Most are run along lean and efficient private enterprise lines that government bureaucracy is seemingly unable to emulate. Often they are the only enterprise in town bringing in money that doesn't originally come from the Australian taxpayer. Currently, in many cases due simply to lack of accommodation, many are understaffed, with the result that opportunities are not grasped, potential remains unrealised and the staff who are there burn out.

Markets can be fickle and perceptions are important. The credibility of Australian indigenous art needs to be protected. Not being motivated by short-term gain, community art centres are focused on sustainable outcomes. Artists' careers are nurtured rather than cashed-in. Maintenance of a high quality of work presented for sale is an ongoing consideration.

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

Unlike many indigenous communities in Queensland Lockhart River is rich in infrastructure in-as-much-as it does have an art centre. The major problem at Lockhart River is lack of accommodation. Current management has been informed that their house will no longer be available to LRAC when they leave. This one difficulty alone could set LRAC back years.

*(e) 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;*

From experience garnered in our five and half years at LRAC we have the following suggestions to make:

- Upon engagement, art centre management and staff sign contracts that include the following stipulations where appropriate:
    1. They agree not to engage in private business dealings with art centre artists without art centre approval for a period of some years after they leave the employment of the art centre.
    2. They agree to be remunerated by way of wage or salary rather than a commission on sales.
    3. They agree that the art centre retains copyright on photographs where photographic materials and development expenses have been paid for by the art centre. This should also apply to digital images.
  - Art centres have signed written agreements with artists in which agreed obligations on both sides are clearly and simply spelled out.
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- State and Federal Departments and Community Councils make it clear to employees working in communities where there is an art centre operating that they expect them to deal with the art centre if they wish to purchase works of artists who are working through the art centre. (Free trade notwithstanding, just as those same employees are expected to avoid offending the social mores of the communities in which they work, so they can also be expected to acquire artworks ethically. Councils could also make this clear to contractors and other visitors to the community.)
- State and Federal Governments implement a policy that all works of indigenous artists associated with community art centres that are to be acquired for public art come from the relevant art centres.
- An effectively promoted, well publicised association of ethical galleries that deal in indigenous art be established. Perhaps something akin to the Woolmark logo or the Heart Foundation 'tick' could be devised for galleries who deal in works of artists associated with community art centres and who actually source their work from those art centres.

*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;*

It can be tedious dealing with bureaucrats who have no real idea of the problems and difficulties that remote community art centres tend to have in common. Perhaps government could consider recruiting people with an art centre background for positions that deal extensively with art centres and for bodies that formulate policy that affects art centres.

Grant reporting requirements could be streamlined. We suspect that reporting criteria are invariably formulated by large committees.

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

LRAC has found that interest in Australian indigenous art is growing in both the European and U.S. markets. LRAC exhibitions have been held in the U.S. and in England and France with encouraging results. Sales from an LRAC exhibition held in Korea in October '06 were unexpectedly buoyant.

In FY'06 LRAC received an EMDG grant from Austrade for export initiatives undertaken in 2003 and 2004. We have found Austrade representatives working in overseas embassies and consulates to be particularly well informed and uniformly helpful.

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## *Summary*

Anyone visiting remote aboriginal communities will notice that many resemble third world communities more than they do other 'mainstream' Australian towns. Few, if any, could be described as hives of economic activity - they are not awash with riches. One of the few bright lights on the horizon has been the success of the Australian Indigenous Arts industry. That the economic and social benefits that could accrue to those communities from the success of community art centres and artists are being leeched away by unscrupulous get-rich-quick merchants preying on individual artists is unconscionable. Not only is this a diversion of economic benefit from those who can least afford it, it is also a siphoning of hope.

*Sue Ryan and Greg Adams*  
*Lockhart River Art Centre Management Team*