

Isabelle de Beaumont
Arts of the land

Friday 2 February 2007

As I have come quite late to the process of making a submission, I have had the opportunity to read what has already been written by others. As I do not want to go back on the issues they have already raised, my submission will probably focus more on the B and F categories.

I have been traveling extensively in remote communities all over Australia throughout the last 14 years, collecting art to be exhibited mainly in Europe. The art I have collected has found its way to private collections and public institutions in Europe and Australia. My preferred method of collecting was to visit communities and deal directly with art centres.

But actually, it is not the marketing exercise that concerns me here. It is the conditions in the remote communities and the ability of the elders to stay in or return to their traditional country. I am concerned about the possibilities for the generation of elders that I met to be able to pass on this very ancient culture to the next generation, their children and grand children. I am not coming from an ethnological point of view but the fact is that it is a very precious and distinct culture that fuels Aboriginal art, even if the artists choose to express themselves in a way that does not appear to be traditional. Any art in the world is like that – there is a genealogy of inspiration that you can trace within particular cultures. Aboriginal Art thrives on love for a particular area of land called “country”, the artist’s country. You take that away and the art loses its roots as well as the specificity and power that captures so much international attention and acclaim.

In mid 2006, I attended the opening of the museum of Quai Branly in Paris and the related events at the Australian Embassy. It struck me more forcefully than ever before that most of the European and American tourism to Australia is driven by the image of a country with a very ancient culture which people are in awe of. Yet, behind all the glossy speeches celebrating this culture which sells Australia so well, the reality in remote communities lags behind quite despicably. I have not seen any progress in people’s conditions there in all the years I have been around. Matters of health and infrastructure are appalling and there is not much hope apart from selling a few paintings here and there for a few people who happen to have more talent than others, at least in our eyes. I had a conversation with the government minister who was presiding over one of the Quai Branly related events at the Australian embassy. The conversation ended by him telling me bluntly that no government will ever put real money into indigenous communities because it is uneconomical. How can a member of government utter such a word when they know perfectly well that, not only does Aboriginal art sell very well overseas, but that it is also the iconic image of Australia which brings tourists in droves and contributes millions of dollars in this way to the Australian economy? Without a thriving Aboriginal culture, Australia would lose so much of its shine and consequent dollars. Does the government want to have a dead culture, so much easier and less costly to sustain which will be just a convenient folk marketing exercise? This would soon be discovered and despised. I find it terribly sad that the money and contribution that aboriginal people actually make for their country, Australia, is so unfairly dismissed and so little, in effect, goes back into resourcing their communities.

I would now like to comment on some of the things I have noticed quite generally in so many remote Aboriginal communities even if there is a great diversity within what I will express.

The children are bright, smart and sparkly just as any child would be, but, quite rapidly, you will see many of them shut down, lose that spark and fall into despair and self destructive behavior.

Most often, there is no outlet for their energy and skills on the community, and they know too well that, even if they have studied their best, there is not much hope for them to get employment or even integration in our society. Except for government jobs, until now, employers will most often prefer white Australians to them. Many will also arrive at adulthood having had quite an appalling diet for many reasons and are not reaching maturity with a good health - hence their poor life expectancy.

I do not know how it can be achieved but the basics have to be addressed. Very long term programs lasting at least a generation need to be implemented where good diet, education and living conditions go hand in hand. It is so essential to nurture a healthy generation of young men and women who will take their destiny in their own hands and find solutions themselves.

To sustain the cultural transfer from generation to generation, this has to happen within the communities without displacing people to towns, cities or elsewhere. Presence on the land, one's country, home, near the elders, is vital to Aboriginal culture.

To achieve this, money has to be spent on infrastructure, taking in account what we now know about climate change and used to maintain individuals and their communities for at least a generation even if it is called "uneconomical" by some. It could prove to be the reverse in the long run. It would help young people to be proud and motivated to stay on the communities and provide jobs for them where they can be in daily contact with their elders and their cultural knowledge. Sustainability of remote indigenous communities cannot be based solely on art. I believe that every effort has to be made in respect of the very basic essentials, on site. It will create the conditions for culture to go down the generations and art to flourish as a natural consequence or it won't happen any more at all. Art will have lost its power.

So many things can be done:

- First and foremost attach systematically to every bush school a good cook providing one healthy meal a day under the control of a dietician/health worker aware of the type of natural diet the people of that area used to have. The meal should be free and part of the school program. It could encourage attendance at school and ensure that each child does not go hungry as is so often the case due to poor resources and occasional difficulties in the family group. How can a child focus otherwise?
- Learning to care about the physical maintenance of the community could become part of the curriculum. Apprenticeships in mechanics, plumbing, building and so on, should be available on the community.
- It could be learning to live sustainably within a school (and housing) powered by renewable energy - as already happens in some places.
- It could be increasing the links between school and the art centre to reinforce the sense of pride about culture being valued in the community and also in the outside world.
- It is about reinforcing the skills enabling a remote community to achieve self sufficiency utilizing old and new knowledge and technologies that can marry so well for a better life.

So much is possible!

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Please note that English is my third language (as is the case for many aboriginal artists for whom it can be the fourth or fifth language). My first language is French