

Submission

It has been disturbing to watch an art movement develop, reach great heights, attract international interest, and then be undermined by entrepreneurial opportunists. It can be likened to the gold rush in Victoria. The sorts of people who have come to seek their fortunes from aboriginal artists are said to have had chequered careers: drug dealers, pirate video makers, illegal fur traders, ivory traders, caravan park owners, taxi drivers even the occasional policeman has been known to trade in aboriginal art.

So what? It is a free market economy. I believe that it is the art centre based on the community, run by someone on a wage with no personal ties to commercial outlets is the most appropriate arrangement for aboriginal artists of the Northern Territory.

Government policy of self determination and self management has resulted in a hands-off approach to aboriginal people living on remote communities. There is no way of ensuring that corrupt community advisors will obey the law of the land that does not appear to apply to aboriginal communities. The power is in the hands of a small group of aboriginal councilors who are often absent or can be easily bought by corrupt parties. Communities where there are successful aboriginal art centres often attract attention. People employed as shopkeepers, schoolteachers, community advisors, essential service officers, doctors, nurses, police have taken advantage of their position. I have known of employees openly trade in art with the locals which undermines the art centre.

One case, a man running the shop for 6 years openly traded using the shop profits to finance his art business out the back of his house. I remember this community shop having \$60,000 profit every quarter when it was run by honest people. It was well stocked with good food. To see it when this unscrupulous man was running it was another thing altogether. There was very little fresh produce, out of date meat and half empty shelves. He was busy letting the shop go down while he ran his business.

A doctor set up a little art business in his house on a remote community with a successful art centre. He had his daughter flown in to help. This is appalling when you look at the state of peoples' health. I can't imagine he was at all involved in the health of the community. He was also abusing a position of power as a doctor is seen to have special status in a community and is a hard person to say no to.

I think it is essential that any person working on an aboriginal community where there is an art centre should have an employment contract specifying that they are not to have any art dealings with artists.

The art centre:

- the artists' talents are nurtured and encouraged when they start painting. The focus is on painting and not on a commodity
- raises artists' profiles by organizing exhibitions and selling work

- creates a focal point in the community which leads to other activities which include the wider community
- individuals develop their palette and their repertoire, which widens with time
- the manager is on a wage and is accountable to funding bodies, accountants, and committees.
- there is a direct relationship between the amount of money that the painting is sold for in a retail outlet to what the artists receives. This amount, whether it is 60/40 or 50/50 is standard and allows the artist to be paid the maximum amount with the art centre covering costs and banking a profit margin as well. This profit margin then goes into daily responses to the needs of the artists. For example: 'sorry business', bush trips, spending money, telephone, fuel, tires etc.

The private entrepreneur:

- head hunts the top name artists from the art centre once their work becomes valuable
- keeps the artist on a tight leash, sometimes under lock and key
- does not give family members access to the artists when they are painting.
- artists are often stuck in these relationships because they are always owed by the private dealer, so if they cut and run, they lose even more
- does not give the artist paperwork in relation to payments or numbers of paintings done and how much is owed. I have seen artists do their accounting on their fingers. Some old ladies don't know the difference between 15 and 50. Private dealers often use \$20 bills as they look like more cash. This really works. Most elderly artists have no idea what their work is worth.
- often pays in second hand goods (for example cars)
- would like to be seen by an unsuspecting public as altruistic social workers
- it is in the private dealers interest to acquire the work for as little cash as possible then sell it for as much as possible. There is a law against this practice: unconscionable dealing, but to prove this in a court of law is virtually impossible.
- The private dealer can coerce an artist to paint the same painting (possibly reproduced in a book) over and over. There is not the encouragement to develop.

I saw one artist who I have known for years in Mt Nancy hotel one Sunday morning 2005. She had the worst case of scabies I had ever seen. Her skin had become lumpy all over. As I sat on her hotel bed I was immediately was invaded by the mites. She had canvases from 5 different dealers. We talked about doing something about her scabies. The hotel was charging her a nightly fee which would normally have included daily cleaning, it was obvious that the room had not been cleaned for some time. The sheets and blankets were infested as was the mattress. I suggested that she throw out all her bedding and start afresh and get some scabies lotion from the chemist. As we chatted a brand new ute pulled up to pick her up for bacon and eggs and a days work. She was later admitted to hospital, and sent to Adelaide for treatment.

It seems to me that none of the people queuing to get her work felt any need to look after her health. It is difficult for some Aboriginal people to comprehend the germ theory and

Western medicine. They have a different system of beliefs for sickness. When the artists are isolated from their family and community it is easy for cases like this to get out of control.

I have heard that some private dealers provide Viagra and 'professional' women for the male artists. That some artists are allowed out of the painting shed once a week to shop. They are separated from their families. Their families make demands for cash so it is easier for the private dealers to have a strong man around to send them on their way.

The art centre is on the community is active in keeping families together and out bush where life, in general, is better.