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BAKEWELL'S VIEW

WHAT use is art? How can we measure its cost effectiveness? For a government given to ideas of rationalisation, the actual reasons for the fine arts remain irritatingly hard to quantify. Oscar Wilde's cynic — the man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing — would feel comfortably at ease among present attempts to rationalise art education.

Two years ago the London Institute was set up to unify London's art teaching; the process is still under way. The latest recommendations, due in September, are expected to propose that the fine arts department of Camberwell School of Art will close.

Camberwell, naturally, is up in arms. Fine art is its biggest department, with 148 students expected next year. Wendy Smith has in four years built up a course staffed largely by practising artists. It has probably the best-equipped sculpture workshop in the country. The college's own academic committee has backed a motion giving the department its unqualified support.

John McKenzie, rector of the institute, is naturally defensive: "Nothing decided yet. We don't take the view we have to do just what the government wants, but we have to play on the pitch and within the rules. But the more jobs and students I can save the better."

There has, for the past five or six years, been strong government and Department of Education pressure to reduce fine arts courses: Ravensbourne was closed, Falmouth threatened but re-instated in partnership with Camborne. But the trend goes on. Although actual numbers are up — 700 more fine arts students than in 1979 — the implication is clear. Fine art, the study of art and sculpture purely for its own sake, will continue to take a smaller proportion of resources. Fashion, jewellery, ceramics, industrial design all have a utility that can be measured. An artist until he or she is famous, or famous and dead, doesn't yield the same return.

AUSTRALIA'S aborigines certainly know what art is for. Thousands of years ago they made sand paintings. Nowadays they use acrylic colours on canvas. In both cases they paint to tell stories, tales from the Dreamtime, the countless myths, dreams, rituals and legends by which aborigine culture explains the world.

Since the 1960s a school of serious aborigine artists has grown up using the traditional symbols and story-telling but painting what can only be called modern pictures. Some of those pictures are currently at London's Rebecca Hossack gallery, recently opened and intent on showing the best Australian work, including a steady flow of work from the Panpunya School.

Panpunya is in the middle of Australia some 160 miles west of Alice Springs. In the mid-1950s, Australian policy was still one of assimilation of the aborigines, and Panpunya was designated an assimilation depot: barbed-wire compound, pre-fabricated housing, a general sense of desolation. Then in 1971 a white artist and art teacher Geoff Bardon moved to the school there. He recognised and encouraged the aborigines' own tradition of painting. It was difficult at first: varied tribal backgrounds made them reluctant to share their individual myths. Even today, on the walls of the Rebecca Hossack gallery, a notice reads: "This painting is a part of the sacred Tingari Dreaming: because the myths of the Tingari Dreaming are secret, no further details were revealed."

Bardon's efforts paid off. A Panpunya Tula style of painting is now recognised across Australia. The movement has its outstanding masters, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri among them. Collectors are already on the trail. Lord MacAlpine and Robert Holmes à Court have a number. Julie Christie is a recent purchaser.

What is so fascinating for us is not only that are they beautiful abstracts, but that even a slight familiarity with their symbols unfolds a rich and intriguing landscape of aborigine life and concepts.