

20/20

NEXT MONTH NOW

The sudden boom in the popularity of aboriginal art has sent prices soaring and, critics say, has provided mediocre painters with a licence to print money. Not since the Pop Art explosion of the 1960s has a new trend aroused such bitter controversy. Paul Taylor follows the path from down under to the top of the art world's fashionable pile.

RETURN OF T



Below: Pansy Naparnarti's 'Bush Bananas' 5 x 25 foot. Overleaf: George Bush's 'Tingari Dreaming' 3 x 4 foot

THE NATIVE



Last November, multi-billionaire businessman John Kluge of Virginia flew his Falcon 900 jet to the Central Australian Desert. He was accompanied by his wife Patricia, a trustee of the Asia Society in New York which was currently enjoying unprecedented success with an exhibition of Australian aboriginal paintings and artefacts, and Maurice Tuchman, senior curator of twentieth century art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The trio was in search of art, particularly the 'new' aboriginal paintings which render traditional sand and bark painting images in acrylic on canvas. This highly marketable genre has simultaneously been described as the world's newest and oldest art form — and also as the newest fad for a jaded art market.

Examples of aboriginal art date back 30,000 years. The aborigines themselves — who number 225,000, or 1.5 per cent of the Australian population — are thought to have occupied the continent for almost 50,000 years. Nowadays, the civilisation of these former nomads is in ruins. Yet to the tourist, they appear laid-back and carefree — in some ways an exaggeration of 'typical' Australians. On their outback settlements, they like to sit around and share a few jokes. They also love a drink. Unlike typical Australians, however, they have an assured sense of their place in the world which is expressed in their art, a combination of creation myths, maps of the land and ceremonial symbols.

'The natives are extremely fond of painting,' noted Thomas Watling, a convict, almost 200 years ago. Yet these days, in a way inconceivable since Andy Warhol, their painting has become a licence to print money. In Alice Springs, the small modern city at the navel of the Australian continent, aboriginal painters roam around with canvases under their arms for sale to tourists, and taxi drivers have been known to accept a painting instead of cash because they know they can unload it in the big cities for as much as A\$2,000.

Having been assured a bodyguard was unnecessary, John Kluge and his little troupe set out from Alice Springs. He took with him an aboriginal art curator and, loaded up with hampers of fresh food and the appropriate permits, the foursome drove into the outback.

Unlike their white guests, today's outback-dwelling aborigines eat poorly, often gathering sustenance from cans of cocktail frankfurts, packets of rice and dehydrated vegetables and other processed foods purchased from the local canteen. Occasionally, their diet is supplemented with bush berries. They suffer from high infant mortality rates, tuberculosis, trachoma, alcoholism, diabetes, malnutrition, obesity, respiratory, gastric, skin and venereal diseases, and AIDS.

Falling madly in love with the art, Kluge purchased A\$70,000 worth of paintings at Papunya, Ramingining and Maningrida, and commissioned an art adviser to put together a collection of aboriginal art for A\$200,000. To house their ready-made collection, the Kluges will build simulated aboriginal huts on their estate, 'Albermarle'.

'There will be a number of thatched aboriginal-style dwellings around our garden,' says Patricia Kluge. 'Inside, the walls will be white for hanging the paintings, but the floors will be sand, for standing the sculptures in.' The huts are intended to complement Albermarle's new Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Islamic wing, and are due for completion shortly after the Kluges put the final touches on their museum of carriage houses.

Aboriginal paintings already adorn famous homes. They hang in the collections of Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger, the Queen of Denmark, German film-maker Wim Wenders, Australian businessman Robert Holmes a Court, Lord Alistair McAlpine (co-treasurer and deputy chairman of the Conservative Party and a major landowner in Broome, a

pearling harbour on the northwest coast of Australia), Yoko Ono (who was given a work by Janet Holmes a Court but keeps it in storage) and the Vatican.

In the case of Lord McAlpine, who sells primitive art from his London Cork Street gallery, collecting aboriginal art has met with controversy. The aboriginal community-run art agency in Broome claims that he is threatening their business by offering high prices to artists directly — and by totally bypassing the agency. As John Mundine, a prominent art adviser from the Northern Territory, explains: 'He is working against the local aboriginal community. He's only offering artists higher prices to run the competition out. Then, when he's in control, he can offer whatever prices he wants. That's what a monopoly is. His approach is imperialistic.' The art agency in Broome has made its concern known to McAlpine, as well as to Australia's Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs.

As a result of the aboriginal art boom, overnight stars are being created out of shy, impoverished men and women with little grasp of English and even less idea of how to handle sudden influxes of cash. Australian art dealers who were previously unacquainted with the international market are frantically improvising new trading policies. Collectors are rushing to sell their holdings — even at the risk of destroying the market they have created. And the aboriginal art market, in the manner of the newfound market for Soviet art, is becoming a new dot on the international art map.

In Hollywood, Caz gallery — devoted entirely to aboriginal art — opened last November with a star-studded party. Maurice Tuchman recalls, 'I have never before seen an opening where there wasn't one person from the art world.' Yet Carol Lopes, the gallery's owner and namesake, was delighted to introduce the desert painters to her tinseltown clients. American cable TV's 'Black Entertainment Tonight' also featured the so-called 'cave-painters'. 'They can see people coming into the gallery,' Lopes said about her discoveries. 'They are part of the big parties, they can mix with the pop stars so that they can go home, tell their children what they did and where they went, and hopefully this will make the next generation more inclined to paint.'

Yet critical opinion in America about these abstract, geometric, earthy and pastel coloured compositions has been mixed. According to New York magazine *7 Days*' art critic Peter Schjeldahl, the paintings 'are no good. They are turgid and nerveless, with their doggedly completed designs in plastic paint. They look like a type of abstraction briefly fashionable in the early 1970s, when this project was born.' But *Time*'s Robert Hughes was moved to praise the 'striking beauty and formal intensity of the work.'

The aborigines keep the art's meaning secret, which ultimately limits the ways Westerners can respond to it. The paintings can be appreciated as decorative objects, as tribal dreamings dashed off for suburban living rooms and Western museums. Or they can simply appreciate — that is, financially. Indeed, when asked why she made one particular work, a Central Desert painter replied matter of factly that she 'did it to buy a Toyota'.

Even if they can't drive, the aborigines love to own cars. The sandy red road to Papunya, 175 miles northwest of Alice Springs, is flanked by abandoned cars in various stages of decay. Rotting metal and dusty windscreens reflect the sun and flicker like Christmas lights for hundreds of miles. Some of the shells double as half-way houses for sleepy artists on their way home from a heavy night in Alice. Others are decked out majestically with desert flora and fauna.

In Papunya, population 400, every day is like a public holiday. Playing cards and poking at slow-cooking steaks on the barbie are the big

announced that, 'In years to come, the painting will have equal promotional value to this museum as Tiepolo's "Banquet of Cleopatra".' At around the same time, the museum accepted a gift from CRA Australia Limited for the purchase of 80 more aboriginal paintings.

The boom was suddenly official. Without irony, Margaret Carnegie now muses that she, 'was just terribly lucky with these paintings that they turned into money.'

Of her bounty, Carnegie paid A\$20,000 to Daisy Leura, the painter's widow who works collecting garbage in Papunya. It was paid out in two instalments to prevent it from being squandered. Yet the widow immediately bought her son a car, which three weeks later was abandoned — another shiny bauble in the Central Australian Desert.

In the midst of the excitement, New York minimal conceptual art and earthworks dealers John Weber and his wife and partner Joyce Nereaux arrived in Melbourne. They were on the rebound from a trip to Alice Springs, which seems to have been more like a journey to Damascus. The Webers had only just discovered aboriginal art —

thanks to one of their favourite clients, James Mollison, then director of the Australian National Gallery. As Weber recalls, Mollison would pronounce that, 'In terms of contemporary art, the aboriginal thing is the most exciting thing that's ever happened in contemporary art in Australia.' (Not long ago, however, Mollison was entirely dismissive of the Papunya art movement.)

On an invited tour of the Australian National Gallery, the couple was led by one of Mollison's curators to the aboriginal section. 'Now we're going to go into this room that has the most important stuff being done in Australia today,' said the curator with a flourish. And, as Weber recalls, 'We walked in the room and it was like, "oh, my goodness!" "Wow, this is something else!" I mean, these people really know how to deal with composition issues, colour issues, and yet are very different from any mind set that I'd seen before!'

The dealers trekked to Melbourne and immediately started negotiations with Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. Gabrielle Pizzi, a typically tony version of the moneyed Melbourne establishment, has exhibited aboriginal art since 1983, and she opened her gallery two years ago. (It has become the pre-eminent outlet for Central Desert painting outside Alice Springs.) She invited the Webers to lunch in the countryside and discovered they were already staunch converts to everything Australian. She recalls that the American couple turned up in designer 'stockmen' clothes and came equipped with a video camera.

At that meeting, and at meetings since at the John Weber Gallery in New York's SoHo, Pizzi explained that the Papunya situation is 'delicate.' There is a lot of bad art and a little good art, she says, but the art advisers are bound by contract to supply painting materials to everybody, and to try to sell everybody's work — 'The market is literally being flooded.' To Weber, however, the situation is 'just total anarchy'.

'What about that Tim Leura painting?' he now says about 'Possum Spirit Dreaming'. 'It's crazy. The work doesn't justify that kind of high price. That's just speculation.' Weber says that, by contrast, he is carefully building a market for Central Desert painting by setting price ceilings instead of selling works for as much as possible. He also claims to have convinced Pizzi and her supplier — the artist-owned Papunya Tula Company in Alice Springs — to give him works for sale on consignment, 'which they haven't done for anybody before', and to promise not to undercut his prices by offering works for sale for less in Australia or anywhere else.

As their present arrangement stands, his gallery takes 40 per cent of the retail price; Pizzi will take 10 per cent, the Papunya company 5 per cent and the artist will get 45 per cent. On these terms, given shipping, gallery and travel expenses, Weber estimates that he will lose 'somewhere between US\$50,000 to US\$75,000 — even if everything is sold at the exhibition.' Future sales may cover the losses, and in any case, says Weber, 'it's good PR.'

'The two of us,' he continues, pointing his thumb at his wife and himself, 'are in the most critical position in all of the world to affect the price structure and the whole situation. That's how I see our role. It's not the one I want, but it's been forced on me.'

Affecting the price structure and the whole situation means, effectively, creating a market. To do this, Weber is selecting a handful of painters whom he is going to push in the way that every splashy new movement since the late 1970s has emerged. Weber will play the Malcolm McLaren or Tony Shafrazi or Mary Boone character, and the aborigines will be his Sex Pistols, graffiti artists or whatever. As for the necessary hierarchy, Clifford Possum Japaljarri will be Weber's number one, his Julian Schnabel.

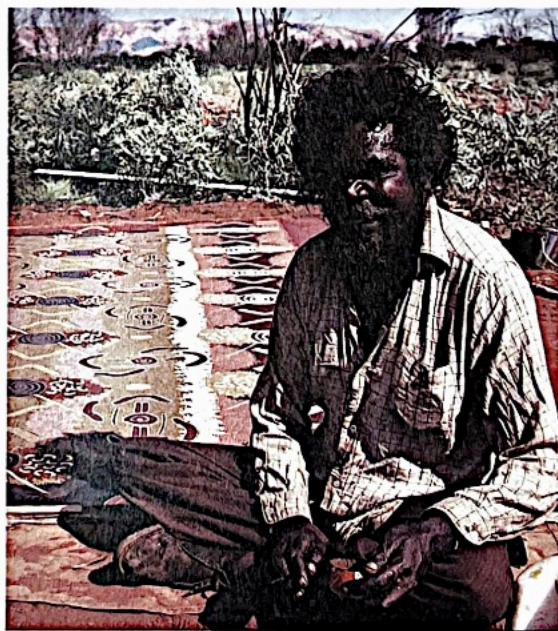
If Weber manages to move aboriginal art out of the celebrity and dilettante market into the hands of reputable museums and private collectors,

he will be doing a service to the Australian art market. But the benefits to the artists will still be hotly debated. Despite their cachet in the States, they are still just 'abos' down under.

At the Asia Society opening, they were made to feel like kings — hotel accommodation on the Upper West Side, trips to Woolworths to buy clothes, the lot. On their way home, however, a group of the artists landed in Australia. Among them was the bark painter David Malangi whose work, back in 1966, had been appropriated and reproduced without his permission on the back of the Australian \$1 bill.

When they arrived at a bank to cash their honorariums — official Australian Reserve Bank cheques — they were refused. 'You could have found these cheques and passports on the street,' the bank manager said, and turned them away. ■

'Songlines' — Paintings from the Great Western Desert, is at the Rebecca Hossack gallery, London, until July 22.



Clifford Possum Japaljarri at Papunya