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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



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 50,000 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

events. The white school teachers, police and health workers in Papunya live holed-up with watchdogs behind wire fences. Gasoline is (often unsuccessfully) barricaded against teenage 'petrol-sniffers'. Unstretched, unfinished canvases lie on the ground for dogs to tread on.

Doorless, one-room brick homes are furnished solely by a mattress, discarded cooking utensils and clothes, and perhaps a canvas or two for painting. There are no showers or toilets. Outdoors, where the families conduct their personal hygiene, a husband and wife team might be at work covering a painting with the signature aboriginal dot patterns. To observe them lethargically transpose their inherited stories and images on to little canvas squares is to discover an art world proletariat that — to all outward appearances — is being bred to paint.

The men are hard-drinking, verbally inarticulate, paint-splattered heroes. Topping off the roughneck image, they proudly sport cowboy hats. The Lee Krasners and Elaine de Koonings of the Central Desert are mute in the presence of strangers, always playing second fiddle to their husbands. Indeed, the best known artists, and the most collected across the world, are men like Clifford Possum Japaljarri, Michael Nelson Jakamarra, Maxis Jampijimpa and Uta Jangala.

The Papunya painting movement started in 1971 when Geoff Barden, a young art teacher, asked the settlement's school children to paint in aboriginal style. The town's elders, observing the stumbling efforts of the kids who had not reached adolescence and therefore were not initiated into the meaning of their art, joined in. Collaboratively, they painted a mural on the school's exterior walls. (It has since been painted over.) The aboriginal fondness for painting had found a new sponsor. Soon Barden began supplying paints and canvases to the men and supervised their painting sessions.

But the well-meaning teacher was a product of the Australian art education system of his day which — at its most progressive — was rooted in the American abstract painting aesthetic of the 1950s and early '60s and was mixed with doses of nationalism. He was, for example, indisposed to Pop Art, claiming that, 'At art school, I learned about theories which say that art grows out of the soil.' In Papunya, Barden discouraged the painters from incorporating images associated with the 'whitefella'. This meant that Clifford Possum, who had become an accomplished landscape painter at Hermannsburg, a nearby settlement, and who at Papunya initially wanted to paint the American comic-book images that so fascinated him, had to comply with the new standards. In Barden's words, they should paint, 'Nothing whitefella. No whitefella colour, no whitefella perspective, no whitefella images.'

Barden also told the artists when he considered their work 'finished', at which point he would take the paintings out of the settlement to sell them. They fetched around A\$75 each.

As many as 600 paintings were produced during the art teacher's 18-month stay in Papunya, and Barden kept 62 of them for himself. Until 1986, they remained stacked and rolled against a wall of his parents' damp, suburban garage. Barden says today that he is unimpressed by most of what has been produced since his departure. 'The work has become more decorative, less sensitive. Some artists have become routine illustrators of aboriginal icons.'

Nestled among the sky-high corporation headquarters of Australia's mining companies and banks lives 78-year-old art collector Margaret Carnegie. From her balcony she can glimpse Melbourne's little aboriginal ghetto — just a mile to the north of St Patrick's Cathedral and the grand Fitzroy Gardens which house Captain James Cook's cottage. In the heart of the ghetto, beside the Aboriginal Health Centre,

is a large piece of 'bicentennial' graffiti that refers to life since white settlement. It reads, simply, '200 years of shit'.

Margaret Carnegie's apartment is wallpapered with aboriginal paintings. She says that she was turned on to aboriginal art more than 30 years ago by Leonard French and Fred Williams, two white Australian artists of the 1950s who had followed the example of the School of Paris — everyone from the Cubists to the Surrealists who were fascinated by primitive art — and learned to appreciate the indigenous art forms of New Guinea and Australia.

Ever since, she has been one of the most notable aboriginal art collectors. For years, there was scarcely anyone in the marketplace with her — a few Australian ethnographical institutions (which generally obtained the art at no cost) and one or two American collectors who foresaw a market for aboriginal art as a result of their knowledge of the boom in American Indian art. But no one imagined that by the late 1980s, these strange, awkward pictures by Australia's most ignored minority would eventually be marketed as contemporary art in hip, post-modernist galleries.

Four years ago, Carnegie approached Geoff Barden to buy his collection of 62 paintings. 'He needed money,' she says, 'so we offered him A\$100,000 for the lot.' She made the purchase with her son, Sir Roderick Carnegie, who at the time was Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of CRA Australia Limited, a powerful uranium mining company. (Sir Roderick's position frequently got in the way of aboriginal art negotiations, says his mother, because of the controversial aboriginal land rights debates in which mining companies are inevitably cast as villains.)

Carnegie may have held on to her newly acquired Barden collection indefinitely, or tried to sell it as a whole. But when she and her son lost much of her fortune in the 1987 stock market crash, she cast about for ways to make cash. Early last year, she offered the Barden collection to the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne for the unheard-of figure of A\$2 million. The director of the museum, Rodney Wilson, and his curator of aboriginal art were shocked. As Wilson wrote in a confidential memo to the curator, 'I'm also very conscious of the "considerable" escalation in price from A\$100,000 to a suggested A\$2m. I had no idea that the A\$100,000 transaction was as recent as 1986! You are absolutely right to be ethically concerned about this and politically cautious.' They turned the Carnegies down.

Not to be defeated, the pair of collector-dealers offered the museum just one work, the largest in the collection. It is a 23 by seven foot canvas — what the painters refer to as 'truck-size'. The work, 'Possum Spirit Dreaming', was painted in 1980 by Tim Leura Japaljarri, a Papunya artist who died in 1984.

A magnificent campaign of gossip surrounded the offer. Insurance values of other works in the Carnegie collection were boosted. Rodney Wilson says that he heard a rumour that Perth millionaires Robert and Janet Holmes a Court, whose apartment in Melbourne is in the same building as Margaret Carnegie's, had offered her the equivalent of A\$1m for the painting in cash and stocks. The work itself was in New York, on display in the Asia Society exhibition which was receiving starry-eyed coverage in American magazines.

'Possum Spirit Dreaming' found its way into the National Gallery of Victoria — through the museum's Felton Bequest fund which is headed by Sir Andrew Grimwade, Margaret Carnegie's nephew. Moreover, the museum paid an unprecedented amount for an aboriginal painting — A\$250,000. (The previous record — A\$10,000 — was set only a year earlier by the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.) Rodney Wilson

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