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Dreaming and dealing

David Langsam explores the new wave of Aboriginal art

The sudden eruption of interest in contemporary Aboriginal art in the past few years is the result of improved supplies of modern art materials to traditional communities in the early 1970s, a dramatic change of policy by the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in the mid-1970s, and a decade of fermentation.

In *Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin describes an outback Aboriginal painter, Winston Japurula, doing business with a Sydney-based dealer in Aboriginal art. She asks him to name his price and after lengthy silence he finally shouts:

"Six thousand dollars!"

Mrs Houston nearly fell off her stool. "Six thousand dollars! You have to be joking."

"Well, why are you asking seven thousand fuckin' dollars for one of my paintings in your fuckin' exhibition in Adelaide?"

Aboriginal art has been a hugely profitable venture for white people ever since Albert Namatjira painted watercolour landscapes and was ripped off by the "official art system". Hailed as Australia's foremost Aboriginal painter and made an "honorary white", in 1958 Namatjira was charged with supplying liquor to his family and died shortly after his release from an Aboriginal reserve.

Some of the Aboriginal paintings now on sale in Britain cost more than \$A7,000 (£3,200) and the collision between the traditionally bitchy art world and the political in-fighting of Aboriginal communities has become a minefield.

The **Tagari Lia** (My Family) is the first international arts festival organised by Aboriginal people, who chose the works and set the prices. Glasgow's Third Eye Centre adds a percentage for its efforts.

Contemporary Aboriginal styles range from the traditional dot paintings of Central Australia and the herringbone cross-hatching of Arnhem Land, to batik and bark paintings, watercolours and a variety of work from Urban Koories. Les Griggs integrates Aboriginal and western influences: a line of coffins set in a traditional background—each adorned with a junkie's syringe. Despite the advances of the past 20 years, Aboriginals still have the world's highest rates of preventable disease, addiction and unemployment and there are a disproportionate number in prison. Their life is reflected in the ironic joke: "Did you hear Johnny Dingo died?" "No, I didn't even know he'd been arrested."

Koorie is one of the names Aboriginals have adopted to describe themselves. The foundation of the Broome Aboriginal Medical Service,



"Yumari" by Tjangala, depicts a giant man with a distended penis, part of a complex Dreamtime story

Aboriginal legal services, radio and television stations and art co-operatives are further examples of the Aboriginals' move towards self determination.

One of the first co-ops, Papunya Tula, in the Western Desert, is the fountainhead of modern Aboriginal painting. The Western Desert paintings originated from sand paintings several acres in size as well as body painting, rock carvings and Arnhem Land bark paintings.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was a gardener at the school and is now one of Australia's finest artists, earning more than £50,000 per annum from his *Dreamtime* stories (the myths and legends of the origin of the land).

Working on a large canvas on the floor of the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, he meticulously places dots forming concentric circles which join one part of a story to another. The 2m x 1m painting will cost £4,000.

"In early days [1975]," he says, "I was working on a canvas, one big canvas for lousy money, might be \$A200 (£85). Might be really big one, ten foot long, might be \$A300.

Possum checks with Alice Springs art gallery manager, John O'Laughlin, if it is acceptable to discuss current prices. O'Laughlin says the art galleries and committees generate a £50 million worldwide industry. He says good artists are no longer exploited because they know the prices. But the days of buying a painting worth hundreds of pounds for a cask of wine are not yet over.

The chair of the Aboriginal Arts Committee

of the Australia Council, Lin Onus, himself a talented painter, wants stronger co-operatives, but is concerned that regulation could lead to artistic censorship. "Britain has seen a whole lot of hoaxers over the years. We want to put our weight behind the good galleries and dry up the supply of duds," he says.

He praises a past director of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Gary Foley, for a revolution in Aboriginal arts funding. A political activist, Foley was the first Koorie to head the board.

"Foley is the most important influence in Aboriginal arts for the last 200 years," says Onus. "He ended paternalism and introduced direct involvement. Aboriginals now talk about *their* Arts Board. They are passionately interested in its workings. Fifty per cent of white artists know of the Australia Council, but 95 per cent of Aboriginals know the Arts Board."

Rebecca Hossack was the first gallerist to exhibit Aboriginal art in Britain. Hossack sells chiefly to collectors (Possum's range from £900 to £7,000), and blames Britain's recession for poor sales at home. She says there is greater interest in France and the US—in New York big pieces fetch up to £50,000.

Hossack makes a 50 per cent mark-up for all her artists, but only buys Aboriginal art through the authorised co-operatives. For her, that's a matter of sensitivity, a sensitivity that some, like English entrepreneur, Patrick Corbally Stourton, don't share.

Corbally Stourton has worked in the City, travelled through Africa and spent several

months in the Australian outback collecting more than 140 pieces. He refuses to discuss what he paid for his works. "I pay the best price for the best paintings," he says. But he has been criticised for not knowing enough about the art to keep certain tribal groups separate when hanging the paintings, and it is said that he pays very little for them. He insists that artists know their market value.

"The good artists are difficult to come by. 'Cause everybody wants them. More and more people are going to go up there, deal directly with the artists and get hold of them. [It] can do only one thing for the price, that's push it up. They're becoming very rare pieces." But there is concern within the Aboriginal community that the boom is leading to falling standards.

Corbally Stourton says he loves the desert and Aboriginals, but specifies that "the ones in the town aren't as friendly as the ones out of town". O'Laughlin distinguishes between "true Aboriginals" and "urban Aboriginals".

This is offensive to Aboriginals. Providing an independent economic base isn't. Both Koorie and white art dealers want to give everyone the opportunity to contribute to that economy by bringing the market to Europe.

Tagari Lia is at Third Eye Centre, 346-54 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, until 2 September; Glynn Vivian Gallery, Swansea, 22 September-17 November; Cornerhouse, Manchester, 7 December-27 January.