



TONIGHT'S WEATHER: DRY

WEST END FINAL

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Aboriginal art has come out of the outback and into mainstream Western collections. On the eve of two major exhibitions of their work in London, TIFFANY DANEFF asks whether it is the native artists or their Western dealers who risk being exploited

Bush strokes

MELBOURNE, New York, Paris, London. Aboriginal art is getting around and, in the process, making a lot of people a lot of money—not all of them Aborigines. The oldest and newest art form in the world is taking the jaded Western art market by storm. Next Tuesday a collection of more than 80 Aboriginal paintings from the Central Western Desert will go on show at the Mall Galleries.

Aborigines have been painting since the Stone Age, but it is only in the past 10 years that they have been discovered by the rest of the world. At first glance these large canvases look like wild geometric abstracts, a hypnotic whirl of dots and circles. Actually they are a metaphysical map seen from

art gallery. There were sell-out tours in the US. The Japanese, French and Germans all bought. Witchetty Grub Dreaming, Possum Spirit Dreaming—they combined the dynamics of innovative abstraction with an almost medieval symbolism. They were gulped up by a jaded, seen-it-all Western public.

In England, Australian gallery owner Rebecca Hossack was the first person to sell Aboriginal paintings. She pays the Aboriginal painter the same percentage she pays any other artist. Between 1985 and 1987, the value of paintings shot from £18 to £180. Works by top artists such as Clifford Possum Japaljarri, Uta Uta Jangala and Michael Nelson Jakamarra now regularly fetch more than £6000.

"It helped boost the Aborigine's morale," believes Howard Morphy. Money was spread out through their large families.

the prices he paid, but insists they are fair. "I pay more than the galleries and co-operatives. That way I get the best artists coming to look for me.

"I got into it all by accident when my car broke down." The man who picked him up and helped mend his vehicle was none other than Michael Nelson Jakamarra. "When I left he offered to sell me a painting." Patrick couldn't afford it but when he got back to Sydney and discovered what he had missed, he decided to find out more.

The artists will share the money with their immediate family of about 50 people. They might club together to buy a van. Michael Nelson Jakamarra is sending his daughter to university. Such are the benefits of converting religious art into a commodity. In the past 20 years a lot has happened in the desert, all under the scrutiny of art dealers, critics and



This untitled work was painted by Tim Leura Japaljarri in 1975

of everything they passed. Where they dug a hill was formed, where they bled a lake appeared. These "footprints of the ancestors", as the Aborigines call them, are the "songlines" of Bruce Chatwin's book.

The modern movement in Aboriginal art largely began in the desolate settlement of Papunya in the Central Western Desert. This decrepit shanty town had been built to rehouse Aborigines who had been moved out of the desert in the 1950s to make way for bomb testing. Displaced and dispossessed, the number of Aborigines declined, well out of the sight and mind of white Australia. And so they remained until the early 1970s, when a local art teacher encouraged them to paint and supplied materials.

"Art is one of the only ways for an Aborigine to earn money congenially," says Howard Morphy, curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum of Ethnography in Oxford, who has lived with and researched the Aborigines in Arnhem Land. For 10 years they painted, using any old paint they could get their hands on, and sold their work to the occasional tourist or local art gallery for whatever price they could get. That suddenly changed in the 1980s, as Australians became interested in Aboriginal tradition and keen to be seen to be supporting their cause.

Aboriginal art moved out of the ethnographic and into the

ing others to their aesthetics."

WHAT you will see on the walls of the Mall Galleries are shortened versions of what would be drawn in the sand or on bark in secret initiation ceremonies, usually only allowed to be seen by initiates. Showing outsiders these mystic symbols angered some elders; as the movement developed, ideograms were substituted by dots. Even so, elders still check galleries in Papunya to make sure no secrets are given away.

Prices are set by local co-operatives, and their white negotiators try, against the odds, to protect paintings from misuse. They don't want to see their work turning up in vodka adverts.

Independent art dealer Peter Ride has just returned from Australia where, he says, there is concern at the quantity and quality of work being bought. "People are buying paintings for investment without knowing what they are getting and often at the expense of the artists."

Just as there are crooks who will buy a painting in the desert for £4.50 and a crate of beer and sell it in Melbourne for £90, or £2250 in Beverly Hills, so there are Aborigines who realise they are on to a good thing by painting pretty pictures with lots of dots.

Yet, undoubtedly, many more fortunes are made by white manipulation of the art market. These days every Australian airport lounge has "ethnic" paintings for sale. Since it is difficult for an eye used to Western art to tell what is good and what is bad about Aboriginal work, a little judicious hype and reverence goes a long way to transforming an inferior daube into a work of "real" art.

Patrick Corbally Stourton, the 24-year-old organiser of the Songlines and Dreamings exhibition at the Mall Galleries, refuses to discuss

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mately corrupt? Perhaps it is patronising to discuss it from the comfort of the West. After all, we have been doing it for hundreds of years.

● **Songlines and Dreamings—Contemporary Art from Aboriginal Australia at the Mall Galleries, London SW1; 6-11 June.**

● **Clifford Possum and Other Aboriginal Artists from the Australian Western Desert at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill Street, London W1; 12 June-21 July.**

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SARA
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SUNDAY TIMES



Top-selling Clifford Possum Japaljarri holds his painting *Emu Dreaming*

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TELEVISION

Australia: Summer Down Under - Discovery
Channel 4, 10.30pm, 11.30pm, 12.30pm