

SONGLINES

Songlines

Looked upon as little more than an ethnic curiosity, Aboriginal art has often been dismissed as one-dimensional. MATT MOLLETT goes beyond the snobbery to find an exhibition diverse in style and bristling with life.

I had a pretty good idea about what to expect on the way to the gallery. Lots of rich, earthy hues, those spreads of mosaic brushwork and occasional mythical serpents that articulate a grand sense of history. Well, what else could I possibly expect of an Aboriginal art exhibition?

Reared on a diet of the eclectic European styles, which no one museum could possibly hope to document, I saw native Australian art as a static phenomenon, scribbled in the sands of time, and on the cave walls of history, and now available for us Westerners in easy-to-handle canvass format.

At least I wasn't alone — for critics and classifiers in this part of the world, native Australian art is little more than an ethnic curiosity, the voice of a minority and the world that surrounds them.

So for somebody who's obviously been in London too long and read too many critics struggling for an angle, it was just as well that I was the one assigned the task of visiting the Songlines XIV exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery — if anybody needed their eyes opened, it was obviously me.

The annual Songlines exhibition is now in its seventh year, and has taken upon itself the immense task of raising the profile of Aboriginal art in Europe. This year, the two-part exhibition features artists from Turkey Creek, the works of Gertie Huddleston, Jimmy Pike, and photographer Destiny Deacon to name but a few, bringing together a mixture of styles as broad as any collection in the world.

Impressing upon the Western world that Aboriginal art is not, and never has been, a homogenous art form, is the first hurdle that gallery owner Rebecca Hossack has had to overcome. Point out that Moscow is to London what Perth is to Sydney and you begin to get the idea.

"Each community, whether it be Turkey Creek or in the city, is like a separate country, they're that far away from each other," insists Rebecca. "Aboriginal art is not just one person, it's hundreds of people, just like Europe."

So when the British press decline to review an exhibition on the grounds that another Aboriginal art exhibition had been recently covered, it can be a tad frustrating.

"It's very patronising — it's like saying you've done a review of Francis Bacon, so you've done British art, and you can't review anything else."

Things are changing however, with the Songlines exhibition attracting a considerable amount of attention, and the sheer eclecticism of the show becomes immediately apparent. Jimmy Pike's lino prints are the first to greet you, a sequence of representational images of birds, snakes, trees and people. Defying all of the traditional ethnographical stereotypes, Jimmy Pike's black and white imagery now appears on T-shirts, linen and posters, making him a multi-millionaire and household name back in Australia — a far cry from his days in Fremantle prison, where Jimmy first attended art lessons.



of praise

Head up to the Northern Territory and you find one of the most remarkable painting communities to develop in recent years — Ngukurr, on the Roper River. Their broadly conventional representational style includes bold acrylic colours, and its most vibrant exponent, Gertie Huddlestone, is also exhibiting at the gallery.

Her people, the Ngameratjara, spend considerable time fishing the rivers and billabongs, and many of their activities are reflected in bright colours. Take the pinks, reds and greens to be found on Ngukurr, for example, a lively depiction of the animals, tools and landscapes that surround Gertie.

"It's a great misconception to say that Aboriginal art isn't evolving," states Rebecca. "People are surprised at the use of bright pinks, but this is 1995 and you wouldn't stop anybody else from using those colours."

With an almost biblical sense of wonder, the insects and plants in Gertie's work dwarf any human representation, in a clear reflection of a lifestyle so different to that in Europe.

Accompanying her acrylics are her own explanatory quotes, not necessarily an aid to interpretation, but an illustration of the pride and enthusiasm she has for her culture.

That these bolder styles are being widely appreciated by European collectors there can be no doubt. Those mysterious red spots appeared below four of Gertie's works during the private viewing alone.

For most of us it represents the chance to enjoy a form of art relatively new to the northern hemisphere, yet there are still those who regard these exhibitions as a form of exploitation. Rebecca shoots down one more patronising myth.

"The artists featured at this exhibition are serious, committed and

very professional. The fact that they're black and can't read or speak English is irrelevant. It's incredibly patronising to say that these people are unable to help themselves." Rover Thomas is one such example.

Knowing exactly the worth of his creations, the Turkey Creek painter now commands tens of thousands of dollars for his work, which burst on to the international scene last year when he represented Australia at the Venice Biennale.

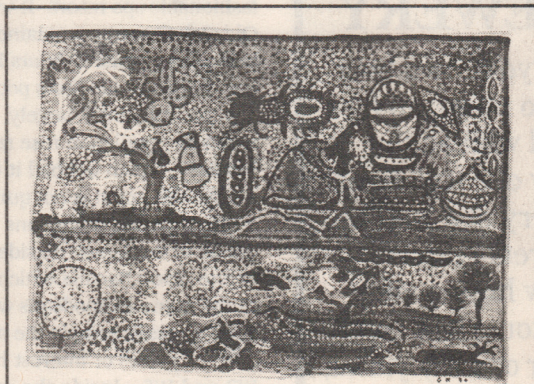
Turkey Creek's location in the East Kimberley has meant that Thomas, and other local artists including Queenie Mackenzie, Jack Britain and Hector Jandany, have been able to achieve some remarkable colours from local pigments, which they mine.

On exhibit are several of their works, illustrating yet another strand to Aboriginal art. Freddy Timm's Mung-dungarli features three rich shades of ochre in a simple yet beautiful portrayal of the desert landscape.

The exhibition, though selling fast, will remain intact for the rest of the month, and represents a rare opportunity to enjoy the different styles under one roof, some 10,000 miles from home.

For Rebecca, there must be some satisfaction in the fact that the world's oldest art form is finally being appreciated.

"It's also the newest," she adds, "and Robert Hughes was right — it is the last great art movement of the twentieth century."



"With an almost biblical sense of wonder, the insects and plants in Gertie's work dwarf any human representation, in a clear reflection of a lifestyle so different to that in Europe."

Songlines XIV will be exhibiting until September 2 at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, Fitzrovia, 35 Windmill Street, London, W1 (0171-436 4899). The gallery opening times are Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm, admission is free.