



THE ART NEWSPAPER

FOCUS ON

# Australia

The fortunes of Aboriginal art outside Australia

## Ethnographica or art?

Some European and American museums have bought work by Aboriginal artists but there is no broad base of collectors outside Australia for such paintings and no consensus that this work qualifies as "art"

Why should a supplement to Australia? Not because 2001 is the centenary of Federation; such anniversaries are only interesting to the country concerned and, in any case, are usually observed along more enthusiastically by politicians than the population as a whole.

It is simply that Australia is an entire continent with nearly 20 million inhabitants—quite enough to have its own ecology of art—yet to fix on the world's press is considered, it might as well be an another planet, except during international judgements such as the Olympics.

The Art Newspaper presents a snapshot, therefore, of some of the issues, and of what is going on this winter in Australia for the southern hemisphere winds down for the summer holidays, the Australians get into high gear!

These pages are not so much for overseas commentators and Australians involved in the arts, will those already about the issue over the driveway of the National Gallery, the majesties of Robert Hughes and the generosity of Anna Torvaldson for the rest of our readers, from New York to Chel. Why should they be interested? Apart from the mere fact that Australia is there, a little comment is expected in that it does so contrary to the European tradition and yet it slightly out of phase with it, more traditional, yet infrequently creative, and more hopeful. A.S.C.

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This supplement has been edited and partly written by Sebastian Stone

When Australians with even the most glancing interest in art meet overseas visitors, Aboriginal art is invariably a pressing topic. Tourists routinely buy Aboriginal work from all sorts of vendors, ranging from airport shops to Aboriginal-owned cooperatives. But many Australians are divided about the health of the international market for Aboriginal art, according to some experts. Wally Caruana, senior curator of Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Australia, says "The acceptance of contemporary visual indigenous art practice is far from common in European art institutions."

"Aboriginal art," he continues, "is often regarded either as an ethnographic curiosity or as an expression of mystic qualities associated with 'new-age' thinking." The health of the market in Australia is, for now, not much in doubt; but Dr Caruana says that "it is vital for the market to be strong abroad," too. He emphasised the importance of financial returns to the artists "and the flow on effects of this in terms of the potential for communities and their art centres to become self-funded... and all the social benefits that entails."

The director of Aboriginal art at Sotheby's, Tim Klagge, is more sanguine about the international situation. Last year at the auction house's annual auction of Aboriginal

art in Australia, Johnny Waringhata Tjaperrala's "Water dreaming at Kallipitjaya" went to an American collector for A\$480,500—a record price for an Aboriginal work. 62% of works by value at that auction sold to buyers in the US and Europe. The high figure was partly explained by the acquisition of 38 works by Karl Heinz Eist, of the Sammlung Eist, near Vienna, Austria's largest privately owned contemporary art collection. The works are now showing there in a survey exhibition of Aboriginal art (see p.52).

Nevertheless, there is no "boom here" of collectors in potentially large markets like the UK. London dealer Rebecca Hossack, who founded the first commercial operation specialising in Aboriginal art in Europe, says she has had to "create a market totally from scratch."

Part of the problem is the old bogymen of geographical isolation, and hence, visibility. "A disincentive for [international] collectors," says Dr Caruana, "is the number of 'shops' that sell Aboriginal art in Europe and the US which often deal in mediocre work. There is [only] a handful of serious Aboriginal art galleries... Now if collectors in Europe and the US only see mediocre work in the flesh, what are they to assume about the quality of all Aboriginal art?"

But the more serious problem involves the category confusion that have long plagued

the reception of Aboriginal art. Gabrielle Pizzi, a long standing and very well known dealer in Aboriginal art in Australia, was caught up in one of the defining con-

roversies around this question when she was barred from inclusion in the Cologne Art Fair in 1994, and then again in 1995, on the grounds that the artists she represents

of were making "folk art" (The Art Newspaper, No 86, November 1995, p.74). After staging a "vigorous battle" against the rejection, CONTRIBUTED ON PAGE 52

### A strained rapprochement



The reception of contemporary Aboriginal art in Australia has been less contentious—even fervent—by the ongoing push for "reconciliation" between the country's underprivileged indigenous inhabitants and later settlers. This photograph shows the landowner and farmer Camilla Cowley embracing Gladys Tybingsempe outside Parliament House in Canberra in 1997, as the debate around native title rights for Aboriginals raged. Aboriginal paintings, which have even been used as evidence in Australia's High Court, have not entered the international art market in the same atmosphere of moral urgency