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Contemporary Indigenous Art

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Abstract
A new exhibition of the NGV’s collection of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander art explores Indigenous art history and culture from the early nineteenth century to now. Situating this display within broader contemporary art issues, Professor Ian McLean sheds light on the art market's recent past and potential future.

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Indigenous Art: Moving Backwards into the Future explores Indigenous art within the context of contemporary world art. In this article, art historian and writer Professor Ian McLean discusses recent contemporary art issues as they relate to Indigenous Australian art and artists.

The Ancestors, the art world and the market
A new exhibition of the NGV’s collection of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander art explores Indigenous art history and culture from the early nineteenth century to now. Situated within a broader contemporary art issues, Professor Ian McLean sheds light on the art market’s recent past and potential future.

Since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) it has not been a happy time for the Indigenous art sector. By the 2009/10 financial year sales, and with the artists’ incomes and collectors’ investments, had plummeted by nearly 50%. There has been some but not much improvement since. Indigenous art centres have been forced back to the souvenir and tourist market. The upside is that government funding to art centres actually doubled between 2008 and 2009, and has continued to increase, though at a much lower rate. Artists’ incomes collapsed, but there have been more jobs in art centre support roles.

These figures and others below are from the recently released Woodhouse Acker report (2014), which surveyed the activities of most remote art centres between 2003 and 2013. Most people imagine that Indigenous art is made in remote Australia where, according to the 2011 census, about 90,000 Aborigines live—which is 13% of the Indigenous population. This is why art made by the other 86.3% of the Indigenous population receives much less attention. Approximately 80% of Aborigines live in metropolitan and regional Australia, with 34.8% – 233,000 people – in Australia’s major cities. There are artists among this population, but despite being included in state collections they remain a peripheral group yet to make much of an impression on the Indigenous brand. Remote art comprises the core of Indigenous art collections in state art galleries. At the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, urban art is collected in a far corner of a room away from the main game. What then is the scope of this main game? Close to 13,000 artists were estimated to be working in remote art centres between 2003 and 2012, with paintings accounting for more than 90% of their production. During this time $99.5 million was generated in sales of 340,000 products. However, only 1% of this was the high-end product (valued at over $5000) that interests the art world; a total of about 3500 items worth $21.35 million. The other 337,000 odd products, worth around $78 million, were made for the souvenir market. These statistics suggest that during this period only about 100 artists made the type of art that attracts the attention of the art world. And it was

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this end of the market that took a hit with the GFC. Since 2008 its market share has dropped 10%, while the lower souvenir end has increased by the same amount.

Before Australian Indigenous art was moved upbeat to the bright lights of the art world's contemporary art scene, it operated in the primitive art and souvenir market. If the art world underpinned the Indigenous art boom, even at its height the souvenir market still dominated remote Indigenous art production. Nevertheless, despite the GFC the art world remains interested in Indigenous art. So what underpins this interest? What are its criteria for distinguishing souvenir art from what it calls Indigenous 'contemporary art', and how did the art jump from the category of souvenir to contemporary art?

The art world is mainly interested in the great spectacle of modernism, and it is no different with Indigenous art. What fascinates the art world is how a select group of remote Indigenous artists managed the continuity of Indigenous traditions within the discontinuity of modernity. It is the greatest drama of the ubiquitous confrontations between tradition and modernity that have shaped modernism across the globe during the previous 200 years. Because in this case the difference appears so great as to be unassailable. What is actually being translated are remaining underwritten, but the drama is riveting, so much so that the art world dubbed the select group of artists 'contemporary art movement'.

The generation that initiated the so-called contemporary art movement was born in remote Australia during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, when the population was at its lowest. The census year of 1921 produced the lowest estimate, just 72,000 people - down from an estimated 750,000 in 1788. Now, as the last of this generation pass on, the population is approximately 670,000. Did the art movement they began have anything to do with this? Were they able to reinvigorate the reproductive potency of the Ancestors?

The basic facts of the movement's beginnings are well known, but not until Vivien Johnson published her book Once Upon a Time in Papunya in 2001 was the full, or at least a fuller, story told. It started in June 1971 when Geoffrey Bardon asked some of the Indigenous men to help him paint the Papunya school mural. A few key elder's tasked the leading Papunya artist, Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa (c.1925-1999), to complete the largest mural. On the school's wall and on six paintings that he painted on board at the same time, Kaapa called on the Ancestors in the usual way - The usual way of addressing the Ancestors of wakening them from their sleep to act on your behalf - to make secret signs, names or signs, in making secret signs public. Kaapa played a dangerous game, challenging the accepted balance between what could be seen and not seen that lies at the heart of the metaphysics of secrecy that still structures remote Indigenous sociality and the power of those who administer it. This 'rattling of spears' (as it is sometimes called) was a deliberate grab for political and religious power within the volatile situation at Papunya at the time.

According to Johnson, Kaapa's politics of secrecy was the key idea of the art movement, as it asserted both the political and religious authority of the artists. No wonder the school mural was experienced as momentous. So too were Kaapa's six paintings, which he made public by entrusting them in the Calais/Northern Territory Art Award. When Kaapa's secret designs won, and when shortly after this Bardon sold other secret designs in Alice Springs for $1200, which to the men seemed an enormous sum of money, they knew that their rattling of spears had paid off. The Ancestors had answered their call.

While the Ancestors seemingly desired the men for a while as the controversy they created simmered, the mural was whitewashed and later dropped off after the 1980s their painting movement delineated in even more spectacular fashion. Is this why the metaphysics of secrecy is more strongly held than ever, as if this pot of gold had to be jealously guarded? Why then did the Ancestors seemingly fall back to sleep in 2000?

By the mid 1990s Western Desert art had become a contemporary art brand for which the market was hungry. As the primary and secondary markets and the hump grew exponentially, an increasing amount of poorly conceived, hastily produced works what the American critic Clement Greenberg would call 'louder art' - flowed from the desert. Mini-celebrities came and went as new product was pushed out the door until the GFC ended it. At least this proved that it
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was contemporary art: that Indigenous art was no different from any other successful modernism. The art that has prevailed is a type of pure abstract painting devoid of iconography that demonstrated the artist's mastery of its formal properties — what Greenberg called 'highbrow' art. This highbrow taste was already evident in the late 1990s in the work of artists such as Kutuwakuli Kitty Kantilla, John Mawunjdjul and Paddy Bedford, as astute dealers looked for something different from the lowbrow art that flooded the market and a way to control it. It was a classic repeat of Greenbergian modernism, which was a reaction against the perceived mid-twentieth century glut of lowbrow modern art following modernism's institutionalisation. Successful post-GFC artists such as Midingdonga Juwarnda Gabon and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu make art that, in its pure abstraction, does not even flirt with the politics left alone metaphysical of secrecy. While the rattling of spears continues, it rarely interferes with the production of remote art any longer. Urban artists are more likely to rattle spears these days, but their focus is political not metaphorical. They are, to continue with the Greenbergian analogy, the 'avant-garde'. Perhaps remote Indigenous art is now fully modernised. With the separation of the state and God that founds the modern nation, have the Ancestors withdrawn to some priestly inner sanctum and left the artists at the mercy of the market?

Indigenous Art: Moving Backwards into the Future is on display at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia until 16 August 2015. Free entry. The exhibition is accompanied by a publication. See page 84 for details.