Contemporary Indigenous Art

Ian A. McLean

University of Wollongong, imclean@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Law Commons

Recommended Citation

https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/2323
Contemporary Indigenous Art

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.

Keywords
indigenous, art, contemporary

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/2323
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. Situating this display within 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 2009/20 financial year sales, and with it 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 centres 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 Aboriginals live—which is 13.7% 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 Aboriginals live in metropolitan and regional Australia, with 34.8% — 333,000 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 corralled in a small corner, 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 $99.3 million was generated in sales of 340,000 products. However, only 1.1% 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 off-rack 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

If the art world underpinned the Indigenous art boom, even at its height the souvenir market still dominated remote Indigenous art production.

Pages 22-23: Michael Cook, Majority Rule — invasion 2014
Above: Robert Andrews, Moving out of mudstone 2003
Opposite: Nyapanyapa, Talkings, pink and white painting 1970
the end of the market that took a hit with the GFC. Since 2008 its market share had dropped 10%, while the lower souvenir end had increased by the same amount.

Before Australian Indigenous art was moved upmarket 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 understood 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 spectacular of modernism, and it is no different with Indigenous art. What fascinates the art world is how a self-selected 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 unassimilable. What is actually being translated remains unacknowledged, but the drama is riveting, so much so that the art world dubbed the self-selected 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 censur year of 1921 produced the lowest estimate, just 72,000 people — down from an estimated 750,000 in 1856. Now, as
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.

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 1950s in the work of artists such as Kutamulakuni Kitty Kantilla, John Mawurndjul and Raddy Bedford, as astute dealers looked for something different from the lowbrow art then flooding 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 institutionalization. Successful post-GFC artists such as Milingimbi's Juwinda Gabon and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu make art that, in its pure abstraction, does not even flirt with the politics let alone metaphysics 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 raise spears these days, but their focus is political not metaphysical. 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.