



PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

Exhibit 11

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Bec Mac: Hi. Bec Mac here for Fake Art Harms campaign. And now I'm in another incredible artist's studio. I'm here with Vernon Ah Kee himself and his amazing work on the walls here. How lucky are we to see this? Ha, ha! How are you, Vernon?

Vernon Ah Kee: I'm well, thank you.

Bec Mac: Thanks so much for having us in your studio.

Vernon Ah Kee: It's good. It's good to have visitors.

Bec Mac: Is it?

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah, it's good to have visitors.

Bec Mac: Is it a lonely craft, the old painting?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, usually when artists have a studio we're usually by ourselves. You know, artists are generally trained to work alone.

Bec Mac: Hmm. Yeah, yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: So it's kind of like writers.

Bec Mac: Lucky you've got a few mates in the building, you know—some of your besties, Richard Bell and a couple of others.

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. It's good to have a bit of company around. I mean, you know, when we're down—you know, we've got our heads down making art—it's usually for weeks at a time, and when you finish a body of work you want to come up for air and tell people what you've been doing.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Vernon Ah Kee: So it's good to have people on hand.

Bec Mac: Yeah. Well, so many beautiful pieces of work here. I was just—this one particularly took my eye. Can you tell us what this is about.

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, this is a drawing I did a few years ago of my son Gavin.

Bec Mac: Yeah. I think it looks so much like you. That's what I was thinking.

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah, yeah. My sons do look like me.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah. And so this is my second son, Gavin, who's—I think he's about 16 or 17 in this drawing. And so—I mean, he's 20 years old now.

Bec Mac: And this has become part of your body of work—these large-scale charcoals. Is that right?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, yeah. I've done a lot of them, and it's a way for me to kind of describe the Aborigine in contemporary, modern terms—

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: rather than—and strip away, you know, ideas of virtue and primitivism and exotica. So yeah.

Bec Mac: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So that's sort of interesting leading into the conversation of fake art harming. And, I guess, how do you see that fake art impacts on the community and the—you know, the creation and making of fake art?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, fake art—the whole trade in fake art. I'm aware of it, of course, but it doesn't directly impact on my own practice.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Vernon Ah Kee: Only because it's not the centre of my thinking or my practice. But you see it everywhere, so it's unavoidable.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: But there are different layers and complexities to the issue, of course, you know. And all of this—you know, all of this stems from the early nineties, when we were talking about collective ownership and copyright and, you know, our understanding of IP in how it relates to Aboriginal culture and group communities.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Vernon Ah Kee: But, you know, there were a lot of—you know, there was a lot of studies done in the early nineties and late eighties as well, and the fact that we're talking about fake art now suggests that a lot of the kind

of recommendations that were kind of thrown about in the early nineties and mid-nineties were just dismissed, you know.

Bec Mac: By the community themselves or by the people that are creating fake art?

Vernon Ah Kee: Oh, yeah—dismissed by, you know, people who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo in Aboriginal art and in Australian art, you know. And so now we find ourselves going over this same territory again and asking ourselves and pointing the finger at different sectors of the industry, looking for answers to solutions that have, you know, really simple, simple answers—you know, like the answers to problems that have really simple solutions but will probably be dismissed again.

Bec Mac: So what would you say the simple solutions are?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, I think that, you know, instead of pointing the finger at different sectors of the community, first you have to educate the makers.

Bec Mac: It gets back to the artists themselves?

Vernon Ah Kee: There has to be a bit of agency in the hands that actually make the work, and if we start there then the industry will self-regulate. But what we have now is—you know, there's a lack of understanding about how artists are meant to conduct themselves within the industry and, I mean, it's because visual art is largely unregulated.

Bec Mac: And do you think just even the definition of what Aboriginal art is is sort of an interesting, complex question as well that also impacts on this topic?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, there's lots of ideas of Aboriginal art. That's the problem. This is how complex it is. You know, you ask people, and there's a surface level of what people think Aboriginal art is, but what we have in this country is that Aboriginal art—we have this bizarre, truly bizarre situation where Aboriginal art is used to describe Aborigines, when the opposite should be the case. Aborigines should describe Aboriginal art. That has never happened in this country.

Bec Mac: Yeah. We were sort of just having a little chat yesterday on just sort of how, like, the brand—almost Aboriginal art is a brand, a national brand that we sell overseas as a reason tourists come to our country. Do you think that's part of—that impacts on the issue as well, that sort of, like, investment in a brand of being Aboriginal?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, yeah. I mean, this country promotes its natives as the best, I guess, you know.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha! Sorry, we shouldn't laugh, but it's just kind of ironically sad and funny in the same thing.

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah. I mean, Australia—you could hold Australia up as an example of a country or culture that prides itself on its Aborigines in a really, really kind of surface—

Bec Mac: Paternal?

Vernon Ah Kee: paper-thin way. And, you know, I think this country—and I think, you know, the populace in this country—likes to think of itself as, you know, having the best natives, you know.

Bec Mac: Who make the best art.

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah. We are—I think this country, and we're all complicit in this. I think this is one of the countries that trades on the exotica of Aborigines—of native people in general—

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: which is really kind of a little bit disturbing, I think.

Bec Mac: Yeah, definitely. So, in regards to the parliamentary inquiry, do you think it will make a difference? Do you think this will change—making legislation and law will actually change the problem?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing no.

Bec Mac: Why do you guess that?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, there are power relationships that inform the issues here, and none of the power relationships come out in favour of Aborigines. And, if we know anything about this country, it's that it's very good at kind of carefully managing the power relationships in regard to Aborigines. And so I'm guessing no.

Bec Mac: So what, then, can we do as a community to support genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to produce and promote their artwork?

Vernon Ah Kee: I don't know. I mean, again, it's practitioners and people who sell their works at point of sale points like markets and souvenir shops who need to educate themselves on exactly what could be a more honest practice. But, you know, the consumer needs to be educated as well. So it comes down to developing a much

higher level of general knowledge around, you know, what is the visual, cultural expression of Aborigines in a given area as well.

Bec Mac: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Vernon Ah Kee: So, you know, right now we've got, you know, a kind of pan-Aboriginalism being expressed through souvenir art and kitsch in general. But, amongst Aborigines, that's not the case, you know. So, but then again you've got lots of blackfellas who pander to it as well, who perform it. So.

Bec Mac: But there's a market there, I guess.

Vernon Ah Kee: There's a market, there's interest and there's a currency in it.

Bec Mac: So, as a community, what can we also do to stop fake art happening? What do you think would be a way forward?

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, again, you know, it comes down to being able to identify fake art is, point at it, name it, describe it for what it is and then dismiss it, you know—choose something that you know for sure has a little bit more worth to it.

Bec Mac: Yes, call it out.

Vernon Ah Kee: Well, call it out, but it doesn't necessarily need to be called out. I mean, if you educate yourself about what the hallmarks of a genuine work of Aboriginal culture is, or a general article of Aboriginal culture is, then you will just ordinarily, arbitrarily graduate towards that.

Bec Mac: Fantastic. Well, what's up next for you?

Vernon Ah Kee: I have an exhibition coming up in a few weeks.

Bec Mac: Yeah, and where's that on at?

Vernon Ah Kee: It's at Milani Gallery.

Bec Mac: Fantastic. Ha, ha, ha! And are these works in it?

Vernon Ah Kee: No, no. Some of these works will be in it, but I'm making new work for it, so it's going to be a frantic few weeks.

Bec Mac: You're on a tight deadline.

Vernon Ah Kee: I am, yeah. I usually am, yeah.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! And are you still working with the big portraits?

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah. I daresay there might be some new ones in this show.

Bec Mac: Well, that's good. Well, thank you so much for your time. I know you've got to get busy and fill up all those empty frames over there—ha, ha!

Vernon Ah Kee: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! So thank you very much.

Vernon Ah Kee: Thank you.