

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

28 September 2017

Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

Committee Secretary
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: Proliferation of inauthentic Aboriginal art 'style'

The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia is a collecting and exhibiting institution based at Circular Quay, in Sydney, New South Wales. Located on one of the most beautiful sites in the world, the MCA opened to the public in 1991, reopening in 2012 following a major expansion. The redevelopment included an entire floor dedicated to showcasing the MCA Collection of over 4000 works, a new National Centre for Creative Learning and a series of site-specific commissions, including the sculpture terrace and foyer wall.

Currently over a quarter of the MCA Collection is made up of Indigenous objects and work. Contemporary Indigenous art from around the country is displayed across our collection display floors and in curated temporary exhibitions of Indigenous art practice within our forward exhibition program. The Museum does not sell Indigenous art work, nor does it purchase Indigenous art work from the secondary (auction) market. The MCA has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy which encompasses the embedding of Indigenous paradigms and sensibilities across all aspects of the MCA's practice, from staffing to collection of work, to our website, our digital, interpretive and published content and to what is purchased for the MCA shop. The Museum has an Indigenous Advisory Committee, chaired by Prof Michael McDaniell, which meets four times a year and continues to lead, revise and advise on the best practice mechanisms embedded within the institution.

Our collection policy frames the acquisition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works of art. Each work is purchased directly from a community owned and operated art centre, a gallery with best practice model in place and/or those who subscribe to the Indigenous Art Code. The MCA observes the protocols of purchasing wholesale objects for re-sale within the gallery shop from community owned and operated art centres also. The MCA is therefore well placed to make comment on issues surrounding the proliferation of an Aboriginal art style in a commercial and collecting space.

The MCA is committed to this model as it observes the sustainable financial benefits to Indigenous communities, the holistic benefits of dealing directly with Indigenous community-based art centres and the benefits to our stakeholders, customers and

visitors when the Museum purchases authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art work and products for display, for use in our exhibitions, and for sale in our gallery shop. Our Indigenous curatorial staff work closely and directly with remote community art centres and with independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, before they work with their gallerists and representatives.

Indigenous works of art are often commissioned for exhibitions and acquisition. The Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art visits communities and artists, and artists' studios in order to see and select first hand objects and art works, produced directly by the artists who come to the centres to work, or who work independently in their own studios. These relationships of trust are then developed and deeper engagement with the work, the artists and the communities from which they come occurs. The depth of content surrounding the impetus for making the work is a key benefit that comes from commissioning or purchasing work in this way, as well as increased information with regards to the artists' practice. Often artists will be galvanized by working in this way and their practice is extended in new and exciting directions.

In selling only Indigenous work or objects produced through Indigenous-owned and run art centres or organisations, the MCA shop can guarantee that all financial benefit goes to the Indigenous producers themselves, which provides financial sustainability for the makers and for the community as a byproduct. The consumer or visitor can be guaranteed of a genuine product made by Aboriginal hands with all artistic content ascribed to the Indigenous maker. The work is not only authentic but more well made and a uniquely Australian product. Given that the MCA is located at one of the most important tourism sites in the nation, it is critical it leads the way in actively providing visitors with authentic Indigenous objects and art work and educates those visitors with appropriate content across the spectrum of publications, the MCA website and through its educational and curatorial programming.

Education is key for consumers so that they recognize and differentiate between 'tourist' or 'decorative' product and genuine art objects for sale – the latter of which characterizes what is offered through the MCA shop. Education also takes place in explaining why these art objects are valued more highly and cost more to purchase than a mass-produced tourist product – due to their originality and the labour involved by the Aboriginal artist or craftsman in producing the object. Education through our curators and education program, as well as through digital content about what Indigenous art 'looks like' also takes place, so that visitors are exposed to the range of diverse contemporary Indigenous art that is currently being produced around the country, and is shown in our gallery spaces. This may not always 'look' like what a visitor might expect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work to 'look' like.

Thank you for extending an invitation to respond to the Inquiry into the proliferation of inauthentic Aboriginal art 'style'. I wish you every success with the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Ann Macgregor OBE
Director