

Senate Committee on Inquiry in to Indigenous Arts Industry

Submission by Birrung Gallery Sydney

Background To World Vision's Indigenous Art gallery

World Vision Australia through its Sydney based art gallery (*Birrung*) has been involved in the Indigenous Arts industry for over 8 years. The gallery is one of World Visions projects within our Indigenous (Domestic) Programs department.

The gallery represents over 200 Indigenous artists from remote communities in the Northern Territory, West and South Australian regions as well as local urban artists. Surplus generated through sale of art at the gallery is returned to the Indigenous Programs department for expenditure on various initiatives including scholarships for Indigenous students and projects in various states involving issues of health, youth leadership, community development and governance.

At the same time the gallery also conducts a number of projects within the local Sydney Koori community as part of our daily operations.

Over the past 5 years gallery sales of art have generated \$2.5 million in revenue through over 60 exhibitions in Sydney, Melbourne, regional centres and overseas.

Overview of the Indigenous Arts Industry - Our view

Throughout 2005 and 2006 numerous journalists from mainstream media (eg The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, The Age) arts media eg (The Australian Art Market Report) and Indigenous media (eg Koori Radio and Koori Mail) have all conducted exposes of gross exploitation of Indigenous artists. This recent widespread media coverage has alerted art lovers and the public to what many within the Indigenous arts industry have known for years

The truth of the Indigenous arts industry is that media reports of exploitation of artists, unethical practices, outback "sweatshops ", breaches of artist copyright, production of fakes and forgeries are factual. In remote communities where local nepotism and corruption create a climate of fear or indifference many artists are therefore vulnerable to the existing status quo. Illiteracy combined with innumeracy, ignorance of the business and commercial art world, the urgent need for cash or grog are some of the many complex factors that differentiate remote area Indigenous artists to articulate, educated, media savvy white urban artists.

Many outback traders in Aboriginal art predate the growth of art centres throughout remote regions so pre-existing "business relationships" based on cash / in kind payments or obligation create divided loyalties with artists who will paint for both their own community art centre but also whomever else can offer a quick cash settlement. When artists are chronic alcoholics or gamblers (or suffer from family pressure and domestic violence to create income for relatives) this will also affect their judgement in terms of trading with unethical individuals. The local store or roadhouse can often hold powerful sway over neighbouring artists who will book up credit for food by exchange of art.

There are however some notable exceptions of communities who create quality art without the scourge of internal /external exploitation. In most of Arnhem Land or the Tiwi Islands for

example, the geographic isolation is one factor that makes it difficult for “outsiders” to infiltrate communities without being conspicuous.

Similarly these communities work with art forms that are difficult to mass-produce or fake (eg bark paintings are very labour intensive in collecting the raw materials, preparing for use and then painted with hand ground ochres).

With a few notable exceptions the prices of art from these areas are not (yet) in the big league of say famous Western Desert artists who command major market prices and by virtue of the art medium used (modern acrylic paint on canvas) are both quick and comparatively easy to fake.

The main concentration then of unethical practice is in and around central Australia and Alice Springs in particular. There is also the blurred distinction between the tourist and fine art markets where poor quality mass produced works are often sold as “investment “ pieces.

In Sydney most galleries located in The Rocks and Circular Quay trade in art from outback wholesalers/unethical sources while the same applies to Melbourne galleries especially in tourist precincts .The problem therefore lies not just with outback suppliers but by rapacious gallery dealers who ignore the obvious financial exploitation of artists. This issue rarely occurs within the “white “ mainstream art market.

Our own independent research suggests that as many as 60% of Sydney and Melbourne Indigenous Art galleries deal wholly or partially in such stock. This being the case the volume and value of such sales would be significant and should be of major concern to the Federal Minister for the Arts.

As a commercial gallery in Sydney we have frequently been approached

- To buy art from unethical outback traders (known as carpetbaggers)
- To buy art from outback wholesalers known to mass-produce works of inferior quality usually under “sweat shop “conditions where artists receive low remuneration.
- Directly by Indigenous artists from remote areas who are visiting Sydney and selling works cheaply for cash to galleries. Such artists are invariably accompanied by a non Indigenous “friend “ or “manager”
- Offered paintings we highly suspect to be fake.
- Approached by all kinds of “consultants “, “entrepreneurs “ or individuals wanting a business relationship with World Vision (usually to make their own commercial operation seem respectable by association with a major charity)

World Vision (*Birring Gallery*) Initiatives for Ethical Trading and Promotion of Indigenous Art

Over the past 18 months numerous initiatives have been introduced to address past trading practices and ensure our future business plans promote respect and fair-trading for the benefit of Indigenous artists. Likewise through ethical trading the interests of our clients (the art buying public) are also protected.

Our aim is to establish our gallery as the benchmark of how responsible commercial galleries should operate. By example, we hope to inspire other galleries to adopt practices that should be standard in the industry. We also seek to promote wider understanding of Indigenous issues among the Australian public such as Reconciliation and Indigenous poverty and health.

Initiatives introduced already by Birrung Gallery, which form our own internal code of conduct.

- An active Indigenous employment program with 50% of gallery positions "Indigenous designated".
- "Welcome to country" at all events (usually conducted by a local elder)
- Renaming our gallery a local Indigenous name (*Birrung*) approved by the local Land Council after extensive consultation with the local community.
- Appointment of two prominent Indigenous Australians as official " patrons "of our gallery after appropriate consultation with local community.
- Gallery signs that acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the business operates.
- A website that is informative and educational about Indigenous Art and issues within the industry. www.worldvision.com.au/birrung
- Respecting copyright requirements of art centres and acknowledging artists/art centres on advertising /promotion.
- A purchase policy which supports over 20 remote area art centres across Australia.
- Refusal to purchase stock from unethical /dubious sources.
- Established a local Indigenous business (Indigenous picture framer) and support other Indigenous businesses (eg wine manufacturers)
- Returning gallery profits in to specific World Vision projects eg funding a scholarship scheme for Indigenous students at the University of Sydney, a local public speaking program (Koori Toastmasters) and a Youth leadership Program
- Birrung staff attendance at industry events eg Desert Mob Symposium on Indigenous Arts Industry in Alice Springs, NSW Parliament Indigenous Art Award, TELSTRA NAATSIAA Art Award in Darwin, The Grow Indigenous Job Market Day (DEWR) in Sydney or local community events
- Seeking corporate and private donor funding to assist with specific projects or reducing operational costs of the gallery
- Signatory to ACFID Code of Conduct

Ongoing Initiatives

- An educational program of free public lectures on various topics that regularly inform the public of art market information. These have included forums on such contentious subjects as "Indigenous Art as Investment "
- Creating Indigenous traineeships for young Aboriginal arts workers to learn the operations of a commercial gallery. Birrung instigated two 2-year traineeships and a third will be in place in 2007.
- Actively contributing to the local Aboriginal community by staff membership of committees and attendance at community events, workshops, and conferences.
- Advice to World Vision Australia Head Office re a World Vision Aboriginal Employment Scheme.
- Contributor (through World Vision Head Office) to the Australian Reconciliation Development Action Plan
- Association and support of other non for profit Indigenous arts organizations eg Boomali Gallery, Sydney or local communities eg Redfern Community Centre
- Creating a wider understanding within our own staff of World Vision Australia of the issues facing Indigenous Australia
- Numerous public and media appearances /speeches by our CEO Tim Costello who often address issues of Indigenous poverty and health.

- Working with corporations/local government to promote Indigenous culture through events such as NAIDOC week
- Public speaking appearances by Birrung staff at numerous public and private events eg Rotary conferences, charity fundraisers, mainstream and Indigenous media.
- Information handouts about ethical purchase of Indigenous art based on current media reports.
- Visits to remote area communities and art centres by staff to increase our knowledge and understanding
- Instigate sponsorship (private or corporate) for specific cases of individual hardship of artists made known to the gallery

Summary

- At the recent Desert Mob Symposium in Alice Springs The Northern Territory Minister for the Arts suggested that " naming and shaming" would be a tactic she would consider in dealing with unethical trading .We would applaud such action
- The code of Ethics for Indigenous Art galleries introduced by the Melbourne City Council (while voluntary) is also an excellent initiative which could be adopted as a model for other major cities where there is a large proliferation of galleries.

Gallery staff at Birrung Gallery would be delighted to articulate our concerns or provide further information on request .Our knowledge is based on the individual and collective experience we share.

Yours sincerely

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