

Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Crafts Sector

The following is a presentation by Lauraine Diggins Fine Art in regard to the Gallery's involvement in this sector.

Background

Lauraine Diggins Fine Art has been operating since 1974, firstly as Bartoni Gallery located in South Yarra and then from Malakoff Street as Lauraine Diggins Gallery and subsequently Lauraine Diggins Fine Art. The gallery was incorporated in 1985. Its business covers both the primary and secondary art market.

Around 1981, the Gallery commenced dealing with the work of indigenous artists, mostly in the secondary market and commenced to show the work in 1983.

In 1989, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art curated the exhibition, A Myriad of Dreaming: Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art and produced the accompany 140pp colour illustrated catalogue. By this point in time, the Gallery was working directly with a number of indigenous artists.

By 1998/9, the Gallery had established a working relationship with Desart and agreed to assist with the marketing of the Artists of Ampilawatja and with the representation of artists from Urapuntja Arts and Crafts, Utopia.

The Gallery has held solo exhibitions and showcased the artists' work in the Gallery's major catalogued exhibition in 19th, 20th and 21st Century Australian Art Annual Collectors' Exhibition accompanied by a scholarly and fully colour illustrated catalogue.

Lauraine Diggins Fine Art has also shown indigenous artists in an exhibition at the respected Fondazione Mudima in Milan, Italy and exclusively at ArtParis, the contemporary art fair in Paris, since 2004. Lauraine Diggins Fine Art has also participated in the Sydney Aboriginal and Oceanic Art Fair.

We have worked directly with art centres (where possible) and through some local agents such as Rodney Gooch and Delmore Gallery. Since the cessation of Urapuntja Arts and Crafts we have been working directly with a number of artists from the Utopia region.

Indigenous art roughly equates today to about 30% of the Gallery's financial turnover. However, this proportion does not represent a fair understanding of the value of work sold, as the Gallery from time to time will sell works by non-indigenous mainstream artists for figures up to and more than one million (Australian) dollars. In regard to the value of work sold, Indigenous work would now represent around 70% in numbers of items. In saying this, the Gallery still retains its image as a Gallery that handles high quality 19th and 20th Century significant Australian artists.

Commissions

In the past we have bought from other dealers outright or through the auction system and marked the paintings up to accord with the appropriate retail value. In other cases we have taken work on a consignment basis from other dealers and have been afforded a commission which has ranged from 10% – 40%.

Often, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art had a policy of holding these works, sometimes for a number of years. In regard to working direct with the art centres, the arrangements seem to vary. In some cases, the art centres afford a commission of 40% on consignment. This relates to an unstretched completed work. This is available on a for sale or return basis. In some cases, a 50% discount is available on an outright purchase basis, although this seems to becoming a thing of the past. Other art centres, such as Papunya Tula, only allow a modest

percentage deduction and it is expected that the works be purchased. This centre will allow a generous time frame in which to settle the purchase.

This Gallery's preference has tended towards working directly with the art centres. However, the stability of the centres can be problematic, with the exception of Papunya Tula, which has enjoyed over 20 years stability and reliability. I no longer work with two art centres, because one has ceased to operate and the other is dysfunctional.

Working Directly with Artists

Over the past 2 – 3 years in particular, many artists are choosing to work as free agents. This may be due to a number of issues: cessation of some art centres, such as Urapuntja Arts & Crafts; the attraction to Alice Springs for many of the desert people and the pressure of dealers who do not necessarily support the art centre system.

In the case of Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, we work directly with some 20 artists from the Utopia area, simply because there is no art centre; an artist in the Wessell Islands; with Papunya Tula for a select group of artists handled by them; and in some occasions with two other commercial art galleries who source their work direct.

In regard to the artists from Utopia, the works are bought outright and the amount paid will be arrived at by discussion with the artists, and in consideration of the size, quality and marked value of the work. The formula we apply to determine our end price (retail), is to assess our expenses which include airfares, vehicle hire, art materials, freight, field worker, etc and apply a figure to each work depending on its size. In doing this, we seek to make somewhere between 50% – 55%. All our transactions are handled by cheque. To facilitate this, we have made arrangements with a 'local' store for the artists to cash their cheques. Bank accounts are impossible unless the artist resides in Alice Springs.

Observations

Although some indigenous artists are quite savvy about what to ask for their work, I have found many not only unsure of what to ask, but demure to whatever suggestions in regard to value that are put to them. Frequently, they are not cognisant of what factors determine the quality of the work, as seen by a dealer or the market place.

The availability of money is always a dominating factor in the life of the artists, especially in the outstations. In some cases, the closest source of fuel, food, clothing and essentials can be 50kms away and the cost of items is generally expensive. Not all communities and families have vehicles and the trader or 'carpet bagger', as some of the dealers are referred to, exchange necessities for artwork. The canvas and paint are supplied (invariably of inferior quality) and the artists contra off their purchases. Largely, the artists are on the wrong side of the equation. In the case of some of the artists resident in Alice Springs, they are paid a very low fee but have their life made somewhat easier for them, by being bused about, have their food bought for them, etc.

Some art centres do not buy in their artists' work and consequently the artists have to wait for the dealer to sell to remit the funds. This is in direct contrast to Papunya Tula who buy in their artists' work.

Buyer

The industry is booming at present and is basically comprised of three layers. These are:

- Collectors and institutions that will only buy works that are well provenanced and where it is understood that the artist is fairly recompensed for their work

- Collectors who are either only concerned with acquiring what they see as fine art work and do not comprehend the significance of provenance or are not bothered by the lack of it
- Tourist Trade

Economic, Social and Cultural Benefits

From my experience, the indigenous art industry has brought substantial economic reward to communities; a strength, particularly to the women who, in the case of the artists in the Utopia regions, are sometimes the income earners; opportunities to travel; assets such as motor vehicles, which are usually turned into a liability; recognition of their culture and the opportunity for communities to remain centred in their country.

Overall Sustainability

The opportunity to sustain cultural knowledge within a community appears to be substantial. However, from my observations, it is very rare for a young indigenous person to emerge as an artist. I can really only comment in regard to Utopia where of the 20 or so artist I work with there is only one I consider has the possibility of becoming a known and recognised painter. The other younger painters, although they have knowledge of lore, custom and country are probably more 'surface markers' than painters. However, while there is an opportunity for them to paint and be part of a "painting group" the cultural benefit to these younger artists appears substantial.

In regard to the financial benefits, as stated earlier, there is most definitely a remarkable benefit. However, and I relate this to Utopia, painting has not enjoyed much of a tradition amongst the men and since the cessation of men as stockmen. With the exception of hunting, there is little for the men to do. This, of course, is in direct comparison with Papunya. Of the artists I work with there, there are only two men, one a painter and one a sculptor. I think the income generated by the women has substantially changed the dynamic of the community. Further, there are now a number of women living together – widowed, divorced, etc, where one or two are the income earners for the rest. I don't know this, but I suspect that this is a modern situation.

Artistic Sustainability

Logically, artistic sustainability should be a given, however I am concerned that with the movement of indigenous people away from their 'country' to centres such as Alice Springs, that the young do not and will not learn and talk seriously about their lore. Recently, two young men at Utopia painted women's stories for me – food gathering, literally 'surface marking'. I have also noticed that the great men's tradition of Papunya is not being supported by a new generation of younger men.

The tourist market will always be there as it is the least discerning from both the buyer's perspective and that of the producer. I don't think the interest will abate, but I suspect that the secondary market will generate explosive prices for significant works.

Infrastructure

The issue of provenance is vital. An influential part of the buying market will not purchase without it. It is possible, I believe, to create a system that could bring security to the market. I would advocate a central numbering registry. At present, all the art centres have a numbering system to define and identify each of the artworks produced by their centre. With a central system, each art centre would be registered and all works produced by the centre available. This could be accessible by fee on-line. It would provide the name of the art centre, name of the artist, title of work, medium, size, who sold through (if a gallery).

This registry should also incorporate those private dealers working with indigenous artists who meet certain credentials. These credentials should include standards in regard to payment to the artist. Perhaps the dealers' books of accounts should be open for inspection much along the lines of the ATO. A system for valuers has been devised under the TIAS and while it is not perfect, it is largely a system which supports reputable dealers.

The art centres require substantial funding. Many are run on the smell of an oily rag and on the good will of those administrators who take on the adventure of working with indigenous people. Many are unskilled and learn along the way. They are expected to know how to be art advisors and also how to run a business, market the works, etc.

Living can be harsh and the facilities simply inadequate. Frequently there are no appropriate buildings to function as an art centre and often the artists work on the ground under a hot sun. The art centre needs to be both an enticing location as well as a place of escape from other surroundings. Art advisors need training in both the production of art as well as Aboriginal culture. A member of the community, preferably a young person, should be trained as an assistant, either or both in administration or as an assistant to handle paints, canvas, etc.

The art centre should be able to acquire a couple of examples of their artists work annually, to be owned by the art centre, for display for the artists to revere their culture and achievement. This is a cultural heritage for the community.

In regard to the training young artists through a non indigenous system, I see this as complete interference with a culture that has already demonstrated that it is unwarranted.

Strategies and Mechanisms

In regard to unscrupulous dealers / unethical conduct, I have broached this with the suggestion of a central registry to which art centres and accepted dealers are required to log the individual work sold by them. It might also be worthwhile to undertake a community education program, worked through the art centres and particularly through the appropriate dealers, that aims to educate about the reasons for the importance of provenance and how it is both a fair way to purchase and how it also adds value to the artwork.

Government Support Programs

In my experience, art advisors have to work in extremely difficult and harsh conditions which would be unacceptable in an urban environment. A training program could be established for art advisors; not only in the craft of preparation for artworks etc., but also in regard to the management of a business and marketing. Money also needs to be spent in the development of suitable painting areas and storage in the communities.

Growth and International Markets

It would be extremely advantageous for dealers intending to exhibit overseas to have sensible government support. This is best applied to both financial support and professional assistance in regard to lobbying to assist the dealers where appropriate. I have found that Austrade, while friendly, needs to earn its income, it is usually unskilled in regard to assisting in the arts area.

To realize the full potential of the indigenous market, the communities that want to produce artwork need an appropriate art centre which acts as a hub for the community. The artists need to be looked after in regard to the provision of money, and I also believe proper sustenance, such as tea, fruit and a midday meal.