

**Submission from Arts Victoria, Department of Premier & Cabinet, to the
Senate Inquiry into Australia's Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector
October 2006**

1. Introduction

This submission relates to the Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector in South East Australia. It focuses on issues, challenges and development goals specific to the region and is informed by consultations and research undertaken by Arts Victoria and the Koori Business Network (Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development) in 2003.¹ It provides observations and lists existing policies and programs relevant to many of the terms of reference.

The key challenge in Victoria is to build the profile and distinct identity of the South East Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector in order to gain a greater share of a burgeoning international Indigenous arts market dominated to a large extent by top-end and desert art.

The key directions that underpin Arts Victoria's approach to developing the South East Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector aim to:

- Build a well defined market position within the Australian Indigenous art and craft sector;
- Strengthen the capability and connectedness of development, production and marketing activity;
- Contribute to improving economic, social and cultural sustainability;
- Promote cooperative and partnership approaches within communities and across Government to grow business and infrastructure capability.

2. Background

Indigenous visual art and craft from Victoria is unique and distinct from top-end or desert art. It reflects both traditional heritage and contemporary Western experience. Despite the impact of white settlement, the removal of family through government practices up until the 1980s and the loss of traditional language, local culture has survived and over the last decade arts activity has grown steadily.

¹ Arts Victoria and the Koori Business Network, *The Indigenous Visual Arts Sector in Victoria – on the Threshold of Success*, 2003

South East Australian Indigenous artists are involved in a diverse range of artistic activities and produce a variety of art and craft that is of cultural, critical and commercial value. Fine art paintings, limited edition prints, textiles, screen printing, silk and batik, pottery and ceramics, carvings, weapons and artefacts, jewellery beads and necklaces, furniture and furnishings, fibre craft and weaving, glass, possum skin cloaks, sculpture and even the painting of a Melbourne tram.

Contemporary Indigenous art from the region often focuses on issues of reclaiming, maintaining and revitalising South East Indigenous culture. The work of Aboriginal artist Lin Onus is an example of the imaginative power of South East Australian Indigenous Art. Onus began painting in 1974, and before his death at the age of 47 in 1996, he had produced a distinctive and significant body of work providing an insight into his Yorta Yorta background. His style combined Western art with traditional and contemporary Indigenous sources, and his work continues to capture the imagination of the public.

3. The current size and scale of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector

The South East Australian sector is experiencing growth particularly in non-metropolitan areas where approximately 50% of the total Indigenous population (estimated to be 28,000) reside. However, there is a lack of data available on the sector's exact size and demographic profile. A key finding of the CMC's Statistics Working Group is the difficulty in sourcing reliable data on the sector.

Based on figures from the 2001 Census the States/Territories with the highest Indigenous populations were New South Wales (135,319 or 29%), Queensland (126,035 or 27%), Western Australia (66,069 or 14%) and the Northern Territory (57,550 or 13%). More than one in four people in the Northern Territory (29%) were estimated to be of Indigenous origin. In all other States/Territories, Indigenous Australians were estimated to comprise less than 4% of those populations, with Victoria's Indigenous population being the lowest proportion at 0.6% of the State's estimated resident population.²

² ABS, *Experimental Estimates & Projections, Aboriginal & Torres State Islander Australians 1991-2001*, 2006

A 2004 report by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) into Indigenous wellbeing underlines the 'youthfulness' of the Victorian Indigenous people with 57.0% of Victoria's Indigenous population under the age of 25 years. (This compares with 39.0% in the non-indigenous population) Conversely, there are very low proportions - 3.0% (12.0% non-indigenous), of older people aged 65+ years in the Indigenous population. Thus the Indigenous population has a markedly different age structure compared with the total population.³

A reasonable conclusion is that the Victorian Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector is very active, but not as well recognised as in other regions of Australia and is exhibiting strong potential for growth.

4. The economic, social and cultural benefits of the sector

The South East Indigenous sector has the potential to achieve greater economic, social and cultural impact through the development of visual arts and craft activities. Many arts businesses such as Miss Emily Aboriginal Art in Robinvale and East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation in Bairnsdale have proven to be financially viable and well-sustained enterprises in their own right and, importantly, a source of inspiration and leadership for many Victorian indigenous visual and craft artists. Business models of their type interface with the arts, commerce and tourism sectors and contribute to broader Indigenous community development goals and cultural heritage reclamation policies.

A recent project that generated economic, social and cultural benefits for the South East sector is an interesting case study to reference:

Possum Skin Cloak Project

The State-wide *Possum Skin Cloak Project* exemplifies how a major initiative, ground-breaking in scope and scale, can achieve economic, social and cultural benefits for the visual arts and craft sector. Coordinated by Regional Arts Victoria the project was eighteen months in the making and saw the creation of a possum skin cloak for each of the 37 traditional language groups in Victoria. The project was led by four professional Victorian Indigenous artists – Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm, Lee Darroch and Maree Clarke – who each worked with local Indigenous artists to produce the cloak designs in each of the Victorian Indigenous language group

³ Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, *Current Indicators of Indigenous Well-being*, 2004

communities. Traditional techniques, pattern making and language symbols were used in the designs. The cloaks featured in 2006 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony – an unequivocal symbol of the richness, diversity and uniqueness of South East Australia's Indigenous cultural heritage. As well as providing a range of employment opportunities for the sector the project has prompted a revival of cloak-making. Contemporary interpretations of the art are playing an important role in the reclamation and development of a distinctive South East Australia Indigenous visual culture as well as being reintroduced into Indigenous community life for cultural ceremonies including naming and welcome to country.

5. The overall financial, cultural and artistic sustainability of the sector

Research and consultations have indicated that the Victorian Indigenous arts industry is diverse but under-developed. While there are an increasing number of successful professionals working in the sector, some with international profiles, many artists throughout the State lack the skill, resources and networks to produce, market and distribute quantities of work that are of a consistently high standard and quality.

Work undertaken by the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria, both individually and through the partnership program entitled *Deadly Arts Business*, has concentrated effort on strengthening the business, marketing and artistic capability of the sector. Strategies continue to focus on improving the sector's skill and business capability to build longer-term viable, self-sustaining arts business practices, strengthen profile locally and market position within national and international contexts.

Building the Economic Base

Indigenous art and craft has been identified in *Building the Economic Base – the Victorian Government's Indigenous Business Development Strategy 2005-07* as an integral element of a broader Indigenous industry development framework that aims to promote cultural appropriateness, environmental sustainability and commercial viability to attain improved economic, social and cultural benefits for the South East sector.

Deadly Arts Business

A key action for the arts under *Building the Economic Base* is the program *Deadly Arts Business*. Arts Victoria in partnership with the Koori Business Network initiated the program in 2001-02 based on the following aims and objectives:

- Build successful sustainable Indigenous arts businesses across Victoria through improved information links and networks.
- Progress the development of distinctively Victorian contemporary Aboriginal visual arts and craft practices.
- Provide economic development opportunities, through the arts, to dispersed Victorian Aboriginal communities.

Deadly Arts Business is into its fourth year of operation and has contributed to improving economic, social and cultural benefits for the sector by:

- Raising the profile of South East Indigenous visual arts and craft through showcasing opportunities such as the exhibition series *Indigenous Expressions* and *Tribal Expressions* and wide distribution of the accompanying exhibition catalogues.
- Stimulating employment, commissioning and retailing opportunities for Indigenous artists eventuating through major initiatives such as Regional Arts Victoria's *Possum Skin Cloak Project* and the Koori Business Network's *Business Showcasing and Exhibition Program* (2006 Commonwealth Games).
- Providing skills development, creative and professional development and other conferencing, mentoring, training and networking opportunities.
- Establishing the *Victorian Indigenous Art Awards* (VIAA) to recognise and promote high standards of artistic achievement amongst the South East Indigenous visual arts and craft sector.

Although the results of this work is yet to be formally evaluated, observations and anecdotal evidence suggest that improvements to the sector's viability and sustainability have occurred based on: an increase in the number of arts businesses; an increase in the number of recognisable and professionally credentialed artists; improvements to the standard and quantity of work being produced and marketed and; the overall amount of Indigenous visual arts and craft activity occurring throughout the State.

Aboriginal Land and Economic Development Program (ALEDP)

The ALEDP is an initiative of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. The 2005-06 Victorian State Budget committed \$9.6M over three years to establish the ALEDP. The first stage of the program has focussed on the development of tourism related projects in South West Victoria. The projects include the establishment of an art gallery and retail shop in Port Fairy featuring Victoria Indigenous artists.

6. The current and likely future priority infrastructure needs of the sector

Strategies across State Government have tended to focus on building demand for South East Indigenous art by improving the awareness of collecting institutions, commercial gallery operators and NGO's of the unique and diverse styles of art produced in the region and, conversely, improving the capability of visual art and craft practitioners (suppliers) to meet a growing demand.

However, production and distribution pathways in Victoria for the Indigenous visual arts sector vary widely in range from the type represented by the EGACC corporate model (pivotal support for many artists), to an individual artist struggling to find a pathway for the development and distribution of their work. A fair assessment is that Victoria lacks infrastructure to support *pathways* from development through to distribution for the Indigenous visual art and craft sector - particularly in comparison to the succession of arts centres and/or co-operatives that operate in Central and Northern Australia. This 'pathways' issue continues to be a major challenge in Victoria.

Importance of Regional Infrastructure Development

It has been estimated that approximately 50% of the Victorian Indigenous population live in regional Victoria. It is therefore important that infrastructure such as the formation of artist cooperatives, and studio, exhibition and retailing spaces and/or complexes are established in regional parts of Victoria. A very successful example and frame of reference for new and future developments is the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation (EGAAC). A number of regions including Western, Northern and Central Victoria, have been identified as having the potential to sustain arts cooperatives based on current Indigenous arts activities, population, and other related and complementary cultural and industry activity such as Tourism. The importance of ensuring an integrated approach to Victorian Indigenous development,

inclusive of visual arts and craft cannot be stressed enough. Cultural tourism is a prime example of how this approach can work. Victoria's Indigenous tourism sector has been growing steadily for almost a decade, proving that it adds a vital and engaging dimension to the State's tourism product. Industry leaders such as Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre, the Koorie Heritage Trust and Bunjilaka showcase the vibrancy of Victoria's Aboriginal culture and provide opportunities to learn about Indigenous history, stories and the contemporary lives of Aboriginal people.

7. Opportunities for strategies and mechanisms that the sector could adopt to improve its practices, capacity and sustainability, including to deal with unscrupulous or unethical conduct

Victoria's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector is made up of individual practitioners and an expanding range of both new and established businesses. All are striving for greater professionalism, market profile, viability and excellence. Victoria's Indigenous cultural experiences differ to those offered in other states by providing access to more contemporary aspects and interpretations of the culture particularly through the visual arts and craft. And this is an important aspect of activity to take into account when planning and strategizing for the sector's development towards achieving a more prominent and well-defined position within the Australian Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft sector.

Impediments to development

Through research and consultation processes a range of impediments to the potential development of the sector have been identified. Although strategies and initiatives have been implemented to address some of these impediments, many issues persist. They include:

- The lack of dedicated infrastructure support for contemporary Victorian Indigenous artists particularly spaces for producing, exhibiting and retailing authentic and high quality representations of visual art and craft. While the Koorie Heritage Trust, Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum, the National Gallery of Victoria - Australia Indigenous Gallery, a range of NGO's (Craft Victoria, the Australian Print Workshop and NETS Victoria are good examples) and some commercial operators all exhibit and retail work from time to time, many of their charters encompass a set of interests that are much broader than the advancement of local Indigenous visual arts and craft. The sum total of this

activity means that more work is entering mainstream environments. The weakness is that there are not enough organisations with an exclusive focus on contemporary Victorian indigenous visual arts and craft from initiation through to finished product.

- The lack of public awareness, knowledge and understanding of both traditional and contemporary art of Victorian based Indigenous artists continues to be a major barrier to building a stronger market position.
- With a focus on the creation of work, artists do not necessarily have the skills or the support to improve business planning and marketing capability in pricing, promotion and packaging to take advantage of their unique position in the market.
- With approximately 50% of Indigenous artists in the state being based in regional Victoria, many artists experience isolation and find it difficult to keep abreast of current practices.
- Authenticity and provenance continue to be major concerns for the Indigenous arts sector and even more so as the value and identity of the market grows.

Improved Development and Infrastructure

The South East Indigenous visual arts and craft sector has the potential for stronger positioning within a national context and greater international recognition and success in the future. This is due to several converging influences:

- Growing national recognition of South East Indigenous work by major art institutions evidenced by an increasing amount of acquisitions. For example, the National Gallery of Victoria has purchased numerous original works from EGAAC and other sources and is sponsoring an Indigenous Acquisitive Art Award in 2006 for the first time and a major purchase recently by the National Museum of Australia from Bunjilaka of a contemporary possum skin cloak by Victorian Indigenous artists, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm.
- Improvements in the establishment of major Indigenous arts infrastructure over the last decade including Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum and the Koori Heritage Trust. In 2003 EGAAC moved to a larger premise in Bairnsdale with improved facilities and resources. Miss Emily Aboriginal Art has operated successfully since 2000 and other developing initiatives such as Kirrit Barreet Aboriginal Art Gallery in Ballarat are emerging. These organisations are proactive in their profiling of South East Australian Indigenous art and culture

including advocating to local Indigenous artists the importance of researching and learning about their own cultural heritage and identity.

- During the last decade Government support to Aboriginal peoples has shifted from a welfare policy model to a model that promotes and enables self determination. Policies and strategies across Government in Victoria are focused on promoting self-determination amongst South East Indigenous communities through building business, economic and cultural capability across the state inclusive of the visual arts and craft.
- A number of reports attest to the fact that the Australian Indigenous visual arts and craft sector has achieved an astounding rise in interest across the globe – we know that the market is achieving strong growth the challenge is to achieve a major break-through for the Victorian sector within national and international contexts.

8. Opportunities for existing government support programs for Indigenous visual arts and crafts to be more effectively targeted to improve the sector's capacity and future sustainability

Identifying new opportunities for more effectively targeted Government support programs for indigenous visual arts and craft is an objective that is consistent with the Framework for National Cooperation in the Arts and Culture adopted by the Cultural Ministers Council at its meeting in New Zealand on 22 September 2006.

To date, Arts Victoria's approach has concentrated on improving professional and artistic capability within the sector through provision of a range of activities and by promoting a broader commitment across the arts, industry and government sectors to improving the visibility of the Victorian Indigenous arts sector and the way in which it is valued as a whole. As well as dedicated initiatives such as *Deadly Arts Business* Arts Victoria's approach to Indigenous arts development is integrated throughout its policies and programs and aims to be inclusive of diverse art form and cultural practices. Major activities supported directly by Arts Victoria include;

- Recurrent funding to the Koori Heritage Trust and Ilbjerri Aboriginal and TSI Theatre Cooperative;
- Support for Bunjilaka through the Melbourne Museum;
- Targeted initiatives such as *Deadly Arts Business* which includes a biennial Indigenous Arts Conference and the annual Victorian Indigenous Art Awards.

- Working closely with other key areas of State Government such as Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and the Koori Business Network;
- Funding support for Indigenous arts projects integrated across a range of arts industry development programs such as Arts Development, Arts Development for Communities, Professionals-in Residence and International. (The total amount of grants provided directly to Indigenous artists or to projects involving Indigenous artists has increased from \$355,600 in 2001 to \$707,357 in 2005)

Overarching objectives that continue to guide Arts Victoria's approach and that share an alignment with approaches in other jurisdictions aim to:

- Build successful sustainable Indigenous arts businesses across Victoria through improved enterprise development, partnerships and networks;
- Progress the development of the distinctiveness of the South East indigenous visual arts and craft sector, both contemporary and traditional genres;
- Contribute to economic, social and cultural opportunities, through the arts, available to dispersed Indigenous Peoples living and working in Victoria.

The following types of activities have proven to be successful in building the sector's capability and viability:

- Workshopping and Skills Development.
- Conferencing and Showcasing Events.
- Mentoring, Networking & Professional Development.

Activities of this type assist in promoting professional industry standards in the development, production and distribution of high quality and authentic work and to build the capability of the sector and its capacity for self-determination. Subject topics that continue to be of critical importance for South East Indigenous visual art and craft practitioners include, for example:

- Artist Portfolio Presentation
- Copyright, Moral & Cultural Rights
- Marketing and Promotion
- Business Planning and Modelling
- Digital, Information & Communication Technology
- Project Management

9. Future opportunities for further growth of Australia's Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, including through further developing international markets

A range of opportunities present when examining the future growth potential of the South East Indigenous visual arts and craft sector. Strategies for optimising this potential should continue to focus on:

- Improving information dissemination and networking opportunities for practitioners;
- Building management skills, business acumen and marketing capability;
- Mentoring of artists and professional development activities;
- Creating platforms to showcase high quality work produced by Victorian Indigenous artists in local, national and international contexts;
- Research into distribution patterns of Victorian Indigenous work and the development of a plan to improve pathway options for practitioners from initial product development through to distribution;
- Cooperative and partnership approaches to arts initiatives and business development within communities and across Government, particularly in regional Victoria based on exemplars such as the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation (EGAAC) model;
- Higher levels of investment in R&D activity to sustain international export strategies;
- Improvements to infrastructure support – studio, exhibition, residency and retailing complexes and/or cooperatives;
- Establishment of a resale royalty to ensure some of the wealth generated through secondary arts markets is returned to the original creators of the work;
- Wider use of a Code of Practice for galleries and retailers that sell Indigenous art and craft, similar to the code operated by the Melbourne Council in the Melbourne CBD.

Important Lessons for Victoria from models in Central & Northern Australia

In comparing the models of operation of a range of Indigenous art and craft centres of Central and Northern Australia, a number of critical success factors for the centres were identified, as follows, that should be taken into account in Victoria:

- Successful distribution of authentic Aboriginal art is characterised by a professional approach to providing buyers with information about the artist, the artwork and security about authenticity;
- Co-operative models have proved to be the most successful as Indigenous people have ownership, through their executive governing body, to make the decisions that have a direct affect on their own community;
- Direct, informed management decisions made by a group of elected Aboriginal people provides for greater community support and understanding, and creates opportunities for artists to input into decision making;
- Control of the production and maintenance of cultural intellectual property by Aboriginal people is imperative to minimising tension between production and authenticity;
- Aboriginal staffing and operation is in keeping with other Indigenous community models, where there are clear guidelines in place as to ownership, control and decision making;
- Training is seen as crucial to developing effective administration and governing processes;
- Specialised input provides professional development for artists, staff and governing bodies and can assist in developing an effective distribution model;
- Accessible studio work spaces result in greater productivity and development of professional practice;
- Centres encourage networking opportunities for artists and create opportunities for Aboriginal Elders to pass on cultural knowledge and skills to young Indigenous artists in an environment where Elders are respected and acknowledged (time and space for this interaction to occur is seen as integral to understanding and sustaining traditional practices).