

## **For the Senate Enquiry into Australia's Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector.**

### **Personal statement Christopher Hodges**

As an artist, gallery owner and a member of the Australian Commercial Galleries Association, the ethical representation of living artists is a core value. I believe in the force of the visual arts as a dynamic contributor to the cultural wealth of our country.

My gallery, Utopia Art Sydney (UAS), opened in 1988. From the outset, UAS exhibited indigenous and non-indigenous artists, side by side, in a contemporary context and on exactly the same terms.

I have had the privilege of representing the Papunya Tula Artists since 1988 and in the early years worked with the indigenous community organization, CAAMA, representing the Utopia Community.

I have been an advocate for contemporary indigenous art being promoted through Community Arts Organisations.

Indigenous art has had an important role in the introduction to the broader community of the significance of aboriginal culture and, for many, the first chance for dialogue with indigenous Australia.

During this time I have represented some of the leading indigenous artists and seen the damaging affects to their art and careers created by entrepreneurs of mixed calibre with no understanding of the market in which they operate and, on the whole, no interest in art or artists beyond the commodity they produce.

I approach my comments to the Committee only imagining what could have been if these artists had had the opportunity to have their art represented properly in an orderly and respectful manner.

### **The Primary Market**

**Representation** in my submission means that the artist/community organisation has a long term relationship with a gallery. This relationship works to further the exposure, reputation and sales of an artists work and provides a co-ordinated management perspective.

An important criteria for membership of the ACGA is that 80% of the gallery's activity must be the ethical representation of **living artists**.

Importantly, **artwork is held by the gallery on consignment** from the artist. Thus every sale, every decision, is of mutual concern and benefit.

In the non-indigenous sector this practice is the norm and relationships often last a lifetime.

The relationship I have had with Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd since 1988 is an example of how this relationship can succeed in the indigenous sector.

### **The secondary market.**

In this market artworks are purchased outright from artists and then resold. This is the defining characteristic. This is a trading relationship and implies no obligation beyond the first purchase. In the vast majority of cases the artist has no involvement beyond the initial sale, no control beyond that point. This covers works purchased directly from the artist, from businesses, from tourist shops, auction sales, backyard traders and an increasing number of entrepreneurs.

### **Poverty and Opportunity**

The life of aboriginal people in remote Australia is one of poverty. There is, in reality, no real prospect of employment and there is a dearth of services we take for granted such as libraries, public transport, a local pool. Public transport is non-existent and thus transport is a major issue over vast distances. Art is the one activity for individuals to earn income from their own efforts and thus artists within the community are providers for their extended families. Motor vehicles in these circumstances become very important commodities.

### **Values**

Few non-indigenous Australians understand the different values indigenous Australians ascribe to family and money. Providing for family, and this encompasses extended family, is a duty that is taken seriously, a responsibility for those able to provide. Providing for today is seen as far more relevant than accumulating assets and providing for tomorrow.

This is quite at odds with the broader community but it needs to be understood and respected.

### **Compromise**

Given this background it would seem obvious that the artists are the only community members able to provide above and beyond welfare. If we consider their earnings on an individual basis we are failing to recognise their community responsibility and the breadth their income must spread. This leaves the artists vulnerable not only to their needs, wishes and egos but also to the needs of their extended family. Community responsibility often spreads over hundreds of kilometres and very extended families.

## Respect

The importance of representation is not lost on footballer players, actors, authors etc, They have an agent who manages and co-ordinates their affairs. In the non-indigenous artworld this is also the case with a gallery representing an artist, sometimes within a particular marketplace. Different galleries in different marketplaces co-ordinate activities for the artist's advantage.

In the indigenous artworld this happens when community organizations forge relationships with galleries such as mine where the artists are accorded the proper representation. In PTA's case we have worked together to expose the work of senior artists in the early years, seen the emergence of the women from the community and watch the next generations artists emerge. These latter groups were supported by the income to the company of senior artists. This is the way my gallery operates for non – indigenous artist too, the senior supporting the emerging.

The nurturing of artists through the lean years is an integral part of the process. When financial success does come it quite often follows years of support.

Artists can only produce so much quality work and every artist deserves time and recognition for the work they do. An **orderly market** ensures that their artistic integrity is upheld.

## Lack of respect

In the indigenous sector the vulture like group of self styled art entrepreneurs wait for the artists to make it and instantly swoop.

Little or no respect is shown to the community art organisation as the rightful management group, although sometimes they are the first stop and when told existing gallery relationships are in place, they use this refusal as a reason to approach artists directly.

What is shocking is that many traders believe that they have a right to access the best art from the best artists. This absolute lack of respect is a very negative and undermining force.

Many of these entrepreneurs have no love of art, no experience in the artworld and thus the work they acquire is more often than not distributed into the art market at a great diversity of levels, often at very odd pricing (high and low) and often undercutting, or in fact souring, existing arrangements.

The result is a reluctance for community organisations to hold solo exhibitions or to showcase emerging talent, thus keeping them out of the spotlight. This is a tragic curtailing of the exposure of great and emerging art.

## **Explanation**

At this point you may feel I am trying to limit artists and commerce. I am not. I uphold an individuals right to choose and I run a successful commercial gallery.

However, given the poverty in Aboriginal communities, different cultural values and the often highly compromised position many artists find themselves in with regard to distance, family, obligation and having English often as a third language, many artists are at an extreme disadvantage in many negotiations.

Thus the market has to be tackled at the market level where the best ethical and community supportive businesses are recognised. (See Positive Ideas)

## **A Good Story**

My first introduction to a Community Arts success was at Utopia Community in 1988.

Here I was introduced to a group of about twenty women by the Art Co-ordinator. We all sat on the ground. Beside him was a representative of the women. One by one they would pass their work to the front and all comment was translated so everyone in attendance was aware of everything going on. Payments that were to be handed out were announced and everyone present from the most senior woman with a glorious batik to a young girl with some strings of beads was a part of this community.

For much of the next year, the fellowship that everyone shared was an example of what a community art organisation could, and should, be. The smiles were broad on every face. It is this meeting that convinced me to represent these women and thus began my involvement with indigenous art.

No-one had much money, the art was unique and exciting, the artists were proud of their work and every success was enjoyed by all.

## **Some sad examples**

### **Example One**

In 1989 I co-ordinated the first exhibition of the art of the Utopia Community at a leading Sydney art gallery.

Curated over many months this was a compelling exhibition of the best work. These were supplied, on consignment, which stretched the lean resources of the community to the limit. I had placed works with major collectors including the National Gallery of Australia prior to the opening.

Just as it was about to open, a cattle farmer from the adjoining property arrived with a large number of paintings from Utopia. He offered the gallery owner an alternative. Buy these painting now and work with me or I am going to take them around the corner and set up shop with a 'competing gallery'.

The gallery was shocked, we were shocked.

The relationship with the gallery was poisoned beyond repair.

The gallery, wanting to avoid the stock going around the corner, purchased it outright. The farmer was thus back at his cattle station, fully funded and ready to repeat the process, the community organisation was the big loser. By his own account t he pastoralist 'threw a hundred thousand at it'. The community could only dream of such funds.

Less than twelve months previous to this no one was very interested in the art from this region but the collaboration between the community organization and my gallery had meant two important community projects had been put together and sold to major collectors. A very good exhibition had been staged and some publicity ensued.

The advantages to the community involved more than money. Two scholarships were secured to allow two artists a chance to paint for an exhibition without the pressure to sell, a unique and pioneering development. Two books were published on the Art of Utopia.

All this meant to the neighbouring cattleman was a chance to make some money and he quickly turned his location to his advantage and became an art entrepreneur. To many he is a lucky sod but to me this business act totally destroyed a community organization just as it was beginning to find its feet.

I always think of what would have happened if the funds had flowed to the community and not to the cattle station.

## **Example Two**

In 1988 an important exhibition of Papunya Tula Art was organised by Gabrielle Pizzi at a leading New York Gallery, a serious inroad for Australian Art into the international art world.

The exhibition was a great success, but it was the last.

Within a year, so many self styled aboriginal art salesmen had traipsed into the gallery door that the gallery recognised a very disorderly market. This was an entry to the top level of international art and it was ruined by the ignorance, incompetence and greed of unprofessional operators.

I once witnessed an advertising executive in Alice Springs buy a roll of decorative paintings as he was on his way to New York and he would sell them at a profit!

### **Example Three**

I was visited in my gallery one day by a man who informed me that I would be dealing with him in the future. He was taking over all the Papunya Tula artists and would be running the show. He provided a string of misinformation about Papunya Tula Artists and his plans to establish land for artists to live on and work. None of this happened.

It is this arrogance I find astounding and only hints at the style of some businessmen. His actions were not only in pursuit of market share but he was actively working against the company.

### **Example Four**

I walked into a shopping centre one day to find the works of some of central Australia's leading artists hanging from clothes lines on pegs. These works were of poor quality, on cheap canvas and badly displayed. Their prices were cheap by gallery standards but exorbitant in terms of quality. There was no respect for the art or the artists.

Similar showings are held in a rented space at White City where piles of paintings are arranged in size and price. Once again, there is no respect for the art or the artists.

One such entrepreneur sent his plane to pick up artists from a remote community the weekend before such a showing to boost the stock.

Humourously, a relative of one of the artists phoned another dealer and warned of the pick up and he sent his plane ahead.

### **Example Five.**

I was in Melbourne and looking in the window of an art shop and wondered who had done the paintings displayed. Inspection revealed a name I knew but the paintings were not by that artist. I saw a similar style of painting in a Sydney shop, and then on the web. I knew the artist well and these were not their paintings.

I have seen the misidentification of paintings time and time again, though on many occasions the sellers of such work simply didn't know enough about the artist and their work to recognise the problem. This is a problem.

Others simply provided snapshots of the artist with the painting, the assistants not in frame.

## Conclusion

While there are many unethical practices, there are just as many individuals doing untold damage to the indigenous art world through ignorance and greed.

**This must be attacked by promoting the Community Art Organisations and the galleries that represent them ethically.**

## Some positive ideas

### Identification and support

Brand Community Arts Organisations with an authorised logo and publicise the Government support for that brand. In this way Government shows support for possibly the only viable business in remote communities and funnels more sales through the community and not through other agents. See example 1.

Provide a related brand for galleries that **represent** artists through community art organizations. This will focus enquiries and funds to the communities and allow ethical management to be identified and to work. This brand should only be for the primary market representing community art organizations. These galleries are already in constant contact with the communities and thus serve as a mediator for much enquiry. Curators, collectors etc would have the key galleries clearly recognised.

**Re-sellers** of community based art **should not** be branded. Work purchased through the Community Arts Organisation will have its brand and this indicates the source of the work. Good re-sellers will buy branded product if they wish to be seen as participating for the benefit of aboriginal communities.

This method will not stop anyone from participating in the *art trade* but it will identify the source of goods and the relationship of the vendor to the source.

Thus, in a simple campaign, the government can play a role in identifying work sourced through community arts organizations and assist businesses marketing their work, in both the primary and secondary markets. This would funnel more sales through the community, for the benefit of the community and not outside interests.

### The Problems

Businessmen are now taking over community arts organizations, like they have been taking over community stores. This new turn of events poses a new problem and it would be in every community's interest to have an independent management structure.

Community Arts Organizations need excellent management and this role is very important and very complex. Training and conferencing are required and this should be the role of organizations like Desart. Such organizations need independent funding as attempts to be self sufficient have compromised their role in the past.

**The most important step**

Educate aboriginal children thoroughly in literacy and numeracy to the national standard and encourage adult education of same.