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Edited by Lance Campbell

The 'politics' of Aboriginal art

ABORIGINAL art today is "very much part of the continuing political struggle" of Aborigines, according to the Aboriginal Arts Board's new director, Mr Gary Foley.

Speaking yesterday at an Artists Week forum on *Aboriginal Art: The Politics of Consumption and Display*, Mr Foley said Aborigines found art, culture and day-to-day living inseparable, and "until non-Aboriginal Australians begin to understand that they will always misunderstand and not realise the importance of Aboriginal art."

Mr Foley, who also is advocating that Aborigines gain full control of their art and artefacts in galleries and museums, said he hoped that eventually all identifiable skeletons, human remains, sacred and ceremonial objects in museums would be returned to their "proper custodians."

"Private collectors and museums will have to face up to the fact that Aborigines

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are very determined in their quest for the return of their culture," he said.

But Aboriginal art was not only "something that comes from traditional societies ... like bark paintings."

"Aboriginal art today is a whole range of different life experiences, and each of those different life experiences ... is part of the continuing political struggle," he said.

Mr Foley said the AAB — formed by the Whitlam Government in 1973 — had previously had a non-Aboriginal administration.

"Now," he said, "there are all Aboriginal people on the board, and there is enormous potential power to change not just the administrative structures that have denied access to resources ... but also denied Aboriginal people the right to assert their artistic and cultural values."

Mr Foley said that, when he first became director, some people had told tribal Aborigines in the NT that their traditional

art would be neglected by the board.

"But Aboriginal people involved in traditional art forms have nothing to lose," he said. "Different tribal groups would obviously have different attitudes to the display of their heritage."

"Our commitment is for Aboriginal people's control. What really counts is the opinion of the artists themselves and the community in which they produce their work. There'll be no more of bringing people down from the Top End (NT) and when morning tea comes around they get sent to a corner to roll some baccy and leave others to deal with the media ... there'll be no more white exploitation."

"The only people in Australia who have anything to fear from the AAB are those people who ripped off Aboriginal people in the past and are beginning to do it now."

"We are taking the hard line. No more Mr Nice Guy."

Another forum speaker, Mr John Munday, who has been working in Aboriginal arts and crafts for the past 10 years, said Aboriginal art collections displayed in museums and galleries as "visual or ethnic curiosities" were "symbols of power and land ownership."