

BLACK ART ARRIVES IN LONDON

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THE largest exhibition of Aboriginal art ever shown in Europe has opened in London at the Hayward Gallery.

Aratjara, which means "the messenger", features more than 100 works ranging from the overtly political screen-prints of young urban artists to the traditional carved wooden figures of the Tiwi people of Bathurst Island.

The exhibition, which runs until October 10, is being held in conjunction with Corroboree, a festival of Aboriginal dance, music and storytelling at London's South Bank Centre.

Until recently Europeans had been unaware of black and white Australian art, and it was time to overcome this blank spot, said the Swiss-born artist Bernard Luthi, the curator of the exhibition. "In the global history of art, Australia has been missing."

The exhibition, conceived more than four years ago, had been assembled with help from the Aboriginal Arts Unit of the Australia Council and the Aboriginal Artists Management Association.

Luthi said public museums and galleries in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Canberra, plus James Mollison of the National Gallery of Victoria and private collectors had assisted in putting the Aratjara exhibition together.

The Hayward Gallery said in a statement that a vast range of traditions and styles were on show, from the acrylic paintings of the Dreamings of the Western Desert communities to bark paintings in natural ochres of the Yalnga peoples of Arnhem Land.

Work from the urban centres influenced by modern Australian society was also included.

Luthi said the most significant change in the contemporary Aboriginal art on show was the new appreciation it was gaining.

"It has come from being seen as nothing at the end of last century to the situation now where it is a part of the wider society," Luthi said.

"We have learnt from it how a tiny minority is able to contribute to a greater society, and that the artist is a part of society.

"In the exhibition we can see that, beyond the anger and radicalism of activists like Gary Foley, who co-founded the project with me, there is positive action."

He became interested in Aboriginal art on two year-long trips to Australia in 1974-75 and 1977-78. "If you're a sensitive person, you can't help building up an interest in the Aboriginal's position in society along with their art,"said Luthi, who travelled widely throughout Australia.

As a result almost every work, particularly in the urban context, had to be seen in the context of Australian society, he said.

Aratjara was shown first in Dusseldorf's Kunstsammlung between April 24 and July 4, where it was seen by 55,000 visitors.

A spokesman for the Hayward Gallery in London said 40,000 visitors were expected by the time Aratjara closed in London.

AAP