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Not within cooee

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Adrian Newstead is closing the gallery where he has championed Aboriginal art for more than 20 years, writes Ruth Hessey.

It's a sorry business. From Darwin to Brisbane, from Alice to Sydney, from Arnhem Land to the Kimberleys a lot of people are feeling sad. After 21 years spent bridging the distance between remote Aboriginal communities and the shiny arcades of the tourist dollar, Sydney's Coe-ee Gallery is closing this weekend.

During an epoch of startling cultural transformation, Adrian Newstead has toiled in his crowded shop on Oxford Street, beguiling passers-by with the shimmering spots and scales of the rainbow serpent, the electric geometrics of Tiwi textiles, bark paintings, prints, pulsing canvases and a continuous flow of indigenous elders, among them some of the greatest artists Australia has ever produced.

Now, he's packing up, and getting out. Paddington has changed, and so has the business. "When I started," says Newstead, looking harried but genial as the crates load up and the canvases come down, "Oxford Street was a dump and most Australians thought Aboriginal art was something to do with bark."

These days, in the words of Laurie Nilson, an indigenous artist based in Brisbane, "they're freighting the stuff out of Alice Springs in container loads. Every shop on the highway is selling paintings for the price of a bottle of wine."

Nobody could have foreseen either the transformation of Paddington from neglected backwater into glittering commercial paradise, or the triumph of indigenous art.

When a group of unemployed men in their 40s, in a godforsaken desert community, started painting with acrylic on boards and anything else they could get their hands on in the 1970s, nobody guessed they were sparking a great art movement, and a huge industry. Many of those original paintings are now worth big money, and the artists are represented in collections all over the world.

And it didn't stop with the elders of Papunya Tula. The wildfire spread across the Northern Territory to the Kimberleys, into far North Queensland and across Arnhem Land, stoking a creative renaissance in Aboriginal communities as they embraced Western art materials and sought to preserve the lore of a 40,000-year-old oral and pictorial tradition.

Meanwhile in rustic Paddington, what started as a souvenir shop featuring the arts and crafts of Newstead's many bohemian acquaintances (Jenny Kee, Linda Jackson) gradually metamorphosed into a gallery carrying the whole range of indigenous art works, from urban sculptures to the ubiquitous dot paintings.

"I got in on the ground floor of something big," recalls Newstead, 54, "and I travelled with it."

But rather than making a fortune, "I've spent most of the last 20 years doing things for people for nothing," he admits. What has been more important is that the Aboriginal art industry "has been a unique collaboration between white and black people, and it always will be. And I've made some wonderful friends."

The friendships began with Joe Croft (an indigenous artist and Newstead's partner in Coo-ee in the early years), and spread to include father figures like Guboo Ted Thomas, the actor David Gulpilil, and some of the great luminaries of the art movement, from the famous, like Rover Thomas, to the obscure and remote communities at Fitzroy Crossing, Balgo, Yuendumu, Lajamanu and the Spinifex people.

"He's always travelled out to the communities," says Laurie Nilson, "and when I say travel I mean he's driven thousands of miles, just to see the artists, to keep in touch."

"I take trips, but not as many as Adrian," says Gabriella Roy, who runs the Aboriginal and Pacific Gallery in Sydney. "He's been completely dedicated, and helped so many of those communities."

Shirley Collins, an indigenous woman in Darwin who runs her own gallery, Raintree, agrees: "He put a lot of his own personal time and money into it. And he's put more in than he's got back. Those trips are hard work."

Richard Neville, who has known Newstead and his flamboyant wife, Anne, since the '60s, calls him a pioneer. "The social connection between black and white in this country is still largely stiff, shallow, and guilt-ridden. But Adrian has a natural sense of diplomacy. He's genuinely comfortable out in the desert, swagging under the stars. And he has all of these people to stay in his home. The artists appreciate that. In fact I think they love him for it."

Along the way, the friendships have done more than sell paintings. Coo-ee was the first to show Tiwi Islander designs. Since those early days, Tiwi textiles have forged an international profile, as well as a tourist industry.

The links go deeper. Newstead's stepdaughter married a full-blood Aboriginal man from Bathurst Island a couple of years ago. Julie Clarke, who attended the wedding, recalls the "reverence which the Tiwi people have for Adrian and Anne. Such a fantastic, incredible affection. I was knocked out by it."

So why is Newstead closing shop? "I think we've come to the end of a seminal period," he says. "So many of the great desert painters have died in the last year."

Another, underlying factor has been that as the industry has evolved, so have the divisions within it. Newstead has watched the Western concept of individual genius corrupt artists and whole communities. Trapped into the "art star" system, a concept alien to their communal culture, they've been encouraged to churn out paintings, and the quality of the art has suffered. "It's bred a cargo cult, and an avalanche of cargo-cult paintings," he says.

Some of the Aboriginal art world's biggest stars to date, including Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Clifford Possum, have died of exhaustion, pushing out paintings to satisfy the demands of their extended families.

The exceptions, such as Rover Thomas, "a cowboy and a larrikin", according to Newstead, have worked out easier ways to redistribute the wealth. "He dealt with the humbug by playing cards," Newstead recalls. "As long as there were stories and he had fun he'd play all night and allow people to win. It was not unusual for him to go through thousands of dollars of cash in a day. But he had a terrific sense of humour. He used to take his wallet out, and look you straight in the eye, and say, 'whose gonna fill it up today?'"

The other great tragedy of the Aboriginal art boom is that so few dealers recognised the value of the early Papunya Tula paintings.

Take the work of Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, whose acrylic masterpiece *Water Dreaming at Kalipinya* sold for \$206,000 in 1997. "It is extraordinary that an Australian work only 10 years old would sell for this price," Sotheby's director of indigenous art, Tim Klingender, said at the time. The sad irony was that Tjupurrula was living in poverty in Alice Springs at the time of the sale.

What Newstead calls the Achilles heel of the industry its complete lack of a co-ordinated marketing structure, including royalties for the artists has been his undoing, too.

By setting up the Australian Indigenous Art Trade Association, Newstead hoped to develop a code of ethics and a structured relationship between artists, communities and buyers. The organisation met with plenty of resistance, mostly from what Laurie Nilson refers to as "the black bureaucrats", and a sort of reconciliation in reverse.

"The government bodies tried to get rid of the white people in the industry," says Nilson. "Adrian extended his hand, and he was knocked back. And it's the artists who are suffering from the brick walls that have been created." Newstead puts it a little more bluntly: "The idea that only black people should be allowed to speak about black people is a load of bullshit," he says.

"I know how hard Adrian's worked," argues Nilson, "as a white fella trying to promote black artists. Which can be a thankless job. It's taken its toll on Adrian because he's a genuine bloke."

Like the indigenous art world itself, Newstead will probably go on shape-shifting. "I can't imagine Adrian without Aboriginal art," says Gabriella Roy. Shirley Collins agrees: "He won't be able to stop."

Indeed, even as he packs up and says goodbye, Newstead is already cooking up new plans. "I want to do much more interesting things, exhibitions which follow dreaming lines from one community to the next," he says, his eyes a gleam, his voice continuing, over the sound of hammers and removalists, to articulate a dreaming he shares not just with his indigenous friends, but hopefully with a new generation of white Australians.