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Possum feud `not black-white issue'

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"This is not rich white woman bashing poor Aborigines in the desert," Milanka Sullivan, a Melbourne art dealer, said yesterday after a week of recriminations.

The 51-year-old, whose five-year de facto relationship with the painter Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri ended seven years ago, spoke out to defend herself as the battle about his final resting place raged on.

A feud with his family over a written will the artist made in her presence in April has resulted in his body lying in an Alice Springs funeral parlour one month after he died.

"She's still riding the back of the old man, and he's in the morgue," said Colin McKinnon, proprietor of Melbourne's Mia Mia Aboriginal Art Gallery, who has flown to Alice to support the artist's family. "Those people are doing sorry business because his spirit can't rest."

Possum's brother Johnny said yesterday: "There is a lot of pulling."

After engaging a Darwin, QC, Colin McDonald, Ms Sullivan on Tuesday won a temporary Supreme Court injunction which stopped her former partner's birth daughters, Gabriella and Michelle, and "traditional" daughter Isobel Nungarai Possum Hagan from burying him at Mount Allan, 290 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs.

In his will, which the Territory's Public Trustee, Greg Shanahan and Supreme Court Justice John Gallop accepted as genuine, Possum said he wanted to be buried at the neighbouring Napperby station.

But Aborigines who hold title to a small area excised from the 5700 square kilometre Napperby cattle station have said they do not want him buried in their cemetery.

Mr McKinnon said: "The body always comes back to the family no matter what. There are 400 [Aboriginal] countrymen who say he belongs at Mount Allan."

The proprietor of the Desert Art Gallery in Alice Springs, Michael Hollows, said yesterday that two weeks before his death, Possum told him that he wanted to go back to "Mount Allan, my country" to die..

Ms Hagan said: "He doesn't belong at Napperby. It's just the place of his birth." In the Aboriginal way, the artist took her under his wing as his eldest daughter when her father, his brother Emmanuel died, she said.

She had asked each sibling verbally to bury him beside Emmanuel, in keeping with Aboriginal law, she said, adding that Possum did not know the meaning of a white will.

But Ms Sullivan said yesterday that he knew about wills, that Isobel was not his daughter and that Gabriella and Michelle lived in Melbourne and did not know their culture.

"It's really not a white versus black at all. If you asked Gabriella to give you the possum sign, she can't. I can. They might be black, but they don't give a damn."

Mr McKinnon said this was false. He claimed Ms Sullivan, a former teacher, had become wealthy through Possum.

She denied this yesterday, saying she was too poor to own a car. She said he had never supported her. "I never signed my name Mrs Possum, or anything like that," she said.

The family's supporters were yesterday in negotiation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the Territory Government to try to fund legal representation for a court hearing on Wednesday over Ms Sullivan's request for a permanent injunction.