

Desert artists draw a line in the sand: Frank Young - 'Whitefellas make art for all sorts of reasons, looking around the world for ideas and stories. Anangu stories come from families and country'

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Architect Jean Nouvel chose to feature Aboriginal art in the design of the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris because he wanted to add "texture" and "colour" to the building. That's the art-world equivalent of choosing a Picasso to match the sofa.

No major commission of a Western artist's work would ever be described in this way. In many quarters, Aboriginal art is regarded as an ethnographic curio or a decorative showpiece - neither of which is a strong basis on which to build economic sustainability. Remote art communities are now suffering the consequences. How did Aboriginal art end up in this position?

In the red heart of Australia, Aboriginal artists are struggling with this question. As they try to adapt to a depressed market that has been crippled by the GFC, many in the industry want to see Aboriginal art make the transition into the contemporary art sector. But others warn that this comes at a cost, and that the very things that make Aboriginal art unique are in peril.

A few years ago, Aboriginal art was a hot commodity. During the boom year of 2007, more than \$30 million was spent on Aboriginal art at auction, and for a while it seemed like everyone wanted to get in on the action.

Even the British royal family caught desert-art fever: in 2003 Prince Harry infamously appropriated Aboriginal imagery for his A-level art folio.

But since then, interest in Aboriginal art has waned. Last year, Aboriginal art sales were down to just over \$8 million.

While the bursting of the art market bubble - brought about by inflated prices and the long tail of the global financial crisis - has hit all contemporary artists, it has been particularly acute in the remote Aboriginal art community.

Yet the contraction in Aboriginal art can't be explained solely as part of the general art market slump. After adjusting for inflation, sales of non-indigenous art at auction in Australia halved

in 2012 from the market peak in 2007; sales of work by Aboriginal artists, however, dropped by 75 per cent.

Local factors such as the strong Australian dollar and changes to superannuation legislation have compounded the problem.

But of greater significance is the debate over the very notion of "Aboriginal art", which until now has been marketed more as a class of anthropological collectable rather than contemporary work by artists who happen to be indigenous.

The crisis could have a silver lining, however, as artists, collectors and the rest of the art community, as well as the public, now have a chance to rethink the balance between protecting cultural heritage and creating an environment in which younger artists can be taken seriously as contemporary artists.

When Sotheby's launched its stand-alone Aboriginal art auctions in 1997, it classified Aboriginal paintings as "ancient and ethnographic" art. This category of collectables values, above all, objects made by isolated and primitive communities - a standard that doesn't tally with the way Aboriginal artists live today.

Before it sold its local operation to Australian owners in 2009, Sotheby's International still defined Aboriginal art as one of its "ancient and ethnographic arts" alongside Greek and Roman antiquities. "Australian art", on the other hand, was in the paintings, drawings and sculpture department along with impressionism and contemporary art.

As the auction house that took Australian indigenous artists to the world, Sotheby's characterisation of their work as "ethnographic" has left a lasting legacy in the industry. Ethnographic art is measured against a different set of values than those for fine art. For a collector, the most desirable ethnographic objects emanate from an isolated and primitive community. So, for example, a shield embedded with arrowheads and used in combat will be worth much more to a collector of ethnography than a shield made for the tourist market. Contact with Western society undermines the value of ethnographic art.

However, another characteristic of ethnographic art is that it is made by a "people" rather than a "person" - an idea that resonates with many Aboriginal artists. They say their work is indeed the product of a strong culture, and that their priorities don't always match those of contemporary Western artists who seek out individual accolades.

Aboriginal artist Frank Young, chairman of Amata community in South Australia, says there is indeed a distinction between the way Western artists work and the approach taken by artists at the community's Tjala Arts centre.

"Whitefellas make art for all sorts of reasons, looking around the world for ideas and stories. Anangu ... stories come from families and from country. It is made from the heart and is governed by cultural and family rules."

Young and Hector Burton, another senior artist from Tjala Arts, say their art is both ethnographic and contemporary.

"The old people paint the stories of the ancestors," Young says. "There are young artists using the new materials, but I think you can still see culture and stories, and our Anangu way, in these new works too."

Says Burton: "Anangu culture is being learnt and taught as it was before. We are not walking around as we did, but the culture is still strong."

While recognising this cultural pull, there is also a push to avoid locking artists into a traditional lifestyle remote from Western society, and to allow new generations of artists to straddle a traditional and urban existence if they wish.

Some dealers believe that promoting individual Aboriginal artists as contemporary "stars" could be a way forward. "Artists emerge because galleries exhibit individual artists and give them solo shows," says dealer Adrian Newstead.

But far fewer solo shows are staged at commercial galleries representing Aboriginal artists than those exhibiting non-indigenous Australian artists, making it harder for Aboriginal artists to reap the rewards of individual attention.

For Aboriginal art galleries in major cities, solo shows carry more risk. Unlike exhibitions featuring urban-based artists, dealers often need to cover costs such as framing and transport. Galleries also tend to buy Aboriginal artworks outright from artists and art centres, rather than selling work on consignment, as for non-indigenous artists. Carpetbaggers, who undercut the trade by acquiring paintings from artists that would otherwise go to galleries, are also a problem.

So to diversify risk, dealers mount group shows rather than solo exhibitions. As a result, the Aboriginal art market lacks a strong cohort of emerging and mid-career artists to replace the most senior artists who, until now, have generated the lion's share of art sales for centres and their communities.

"Many art centres have lost their key artists in recent years," says Beverly Knight of Alcaston Gallery, Fitzroy.

Not that there is a shortage of young Aboriginal artists waiting to assume the mantle. But the relationship between the Aboriginal art centres where remote artists work and the urban art dealers who buy their works is often fraught.

Traditionally, sales have tended to be mediated through third parties, but dealers now want to deal directly with artists, to prevent the centres from releasing too many inferior works on to the market.

They say the outcome of releasing poor work has been a lack of confidence in artists' work and low clearance rates at auction (the number of works sold as a percentage of the number offered for sale). For example, the figures for Emily Kngwarreye and Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula are 58 per cent and 59 per cent respectively, compared with 72 per cent for Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan.

Aboriginal artists are determined to turn the tide around while continuing to work within art centres - that is, community-based enterprises which provide economic, social and cultural benefits for artists.

"Art centres are important for our communities. We need to keep them strong," says painter Jane Young, chairwoman of Desart, the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres, based in Alice Springs.

Tjala Arts' Hector Burton says that for Aboriginal people living in remote centres, these spaces are not just places people go to make art for the market. "I know we are talking about the paintings, but the art centre is the most important place in the community ... It is much more important than lovely canvas," he says.

Indeed, initiatives such as the joint project between the Dax Centre in Melbourne and Papunya Tjupi Arts in the Northern Territory, investigating emotional wellbeing in Australian indigenous art, and the history paintings project at Warakurna Artists in Western Australia, are not intended as a means of generating income.

Intractable financial pressure on art centres will make important projects like these unfeasible, yet they are of immeasurable worth to their respective communities.

Says Frank Young: "Government talks about closing the gap. Art centres have been doing this - helping communities - for a very long period of time ... We own it, we run it, and it's here for our kids and grandkids. It's a powerful place."

Financial pressures are mounting. The collapse of Maningrida's art centre in the Northern Territory last year was a wake-up call for the industry.

Philip Watkins, executive officer of Desart, describes this as "the most important time in the past 21 years". As a member of the Arrernte and Larrakia families of the Northern Territory, Watkins speaks with great personal authority. He knows it won't be an easy transition. "We must confront embedded practices - if not, we will be left behind. We need to build a better way to make strong art, do strong business and build strong community."

Beverly Knight sees these pressures as a force for positive change. "The first 40 years of the Aboriginal art market are over, but the next stage is really exciting. It's when we become part of the contemporary art world."

Such a shift requires strategic rethinking on the part of art workers. Elizabeth Tregenza, general manager of Ananguku Arts, believes the "painting studio" tradition established in the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunyjatjara) lands in the mid-2000s is a promising development model.

In the APY centres, a clear distinction is made between professional and recreational artists, with the most senior artists involved with the creation of high-calibre artworks.

But the APY centres are also in a good position to exploit other income streams outside the fine-art market, such as the market for tourists, where a different kind of artistic skill is required.

In other remote communities, new nodes of creativity are emerging as artists discover a fresh way to communicate their stories. Central and Western Desert artists are exploring new and experimental media, including recycled and found objects, fibre and soft sculpture, short film, animation, digital portraiture and history paintings.

At Tjala Arts, 27-year-old photographer Rhonda Unrupa has forged a bridge between her Anangu culture and the Australian contemporary art world.

"I look at the work of other Aboriginal artists like Richard Bell, Nici Cumpston and Michael Riley. I am learning inside my community through my family - this is Anangu way - and this year I am going to do a course at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney."

Unrupa is pragmatic about her future as an artist. "The most important thing is to have your own special way and learn all the skills so you can make your ideas work and become real. There are lots of artists out there, so you have to be special."

Dr Jennifer Biddle is co-convener of a national initiative called "Same but different: experimentation and innovation in desert arts". "Some of the most energetic, urgent and significant cultural activity in Australia today is taking shape in remote Australian Aboriginal communities," she says.

Biddle sees innovators such as Tjala Arts as a timely rejoinder to government policy that models Aboriginal communities as sites of social dysfunction. "In this climate and in the absence of a historical record or responsible media analysis, art provides primary witness otherwise."

Other centres are changing their business models. At Keringke Arts in Alice Springs, which exhibits work from the Ltyentye Apurte community in Santa Teresa, Alan Tyley is overseeing the growth of a flourishing online business that allows buyers to browse artworks using the centre's interactive webcam.

Ngurratjuta's art centre is moving to a new space within the Alice Springs Desert Park, where Iris Bendor hopes artists will "liaise directly with tourists", and the centre's operations will be split into two divisions dedicated to "commercial art and social enterprise".

In the face of these changes, some urge caution. Professor Jon Altman, of the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, says: "There is a highly destructive normalisation process under way."

He points to the bureaucratic move to push Aboriginal people into larger population centres and encourage them to be "more Western" and individualistic. "This has a cost for homelands where much art emanates. It is anathema to indigenous creativity."

Dealer Lauraine Diggins is concerned about the direction of some Aboriginal art. "Curators are attempting to move Aboriginal art into a contemporary domain.

"But in the process it has taken away from what it is that makes it special."

Frank Young disagrees. "The work may look different to the work from the old people in the future. Young artists are trying new things with photography and computers. But there is culture in all of these works. Strong culture. The different voice is clear and it will always be clear - an Anangu voice."