

All Aboriginal art is political: you just need to learn how to read it

Protest through Indigenous works is not just the preserve of city 'rabble rousers'. The home of land rights is in the bush, and our art reflects this



'All Indigenous art is a statement about our continued existence, an existence that must be erased for settler colonialism to win', writes Claire Coleman. Pictured is artist Rhonda Sharpe with her work, as part of the installation of soft sculptures.

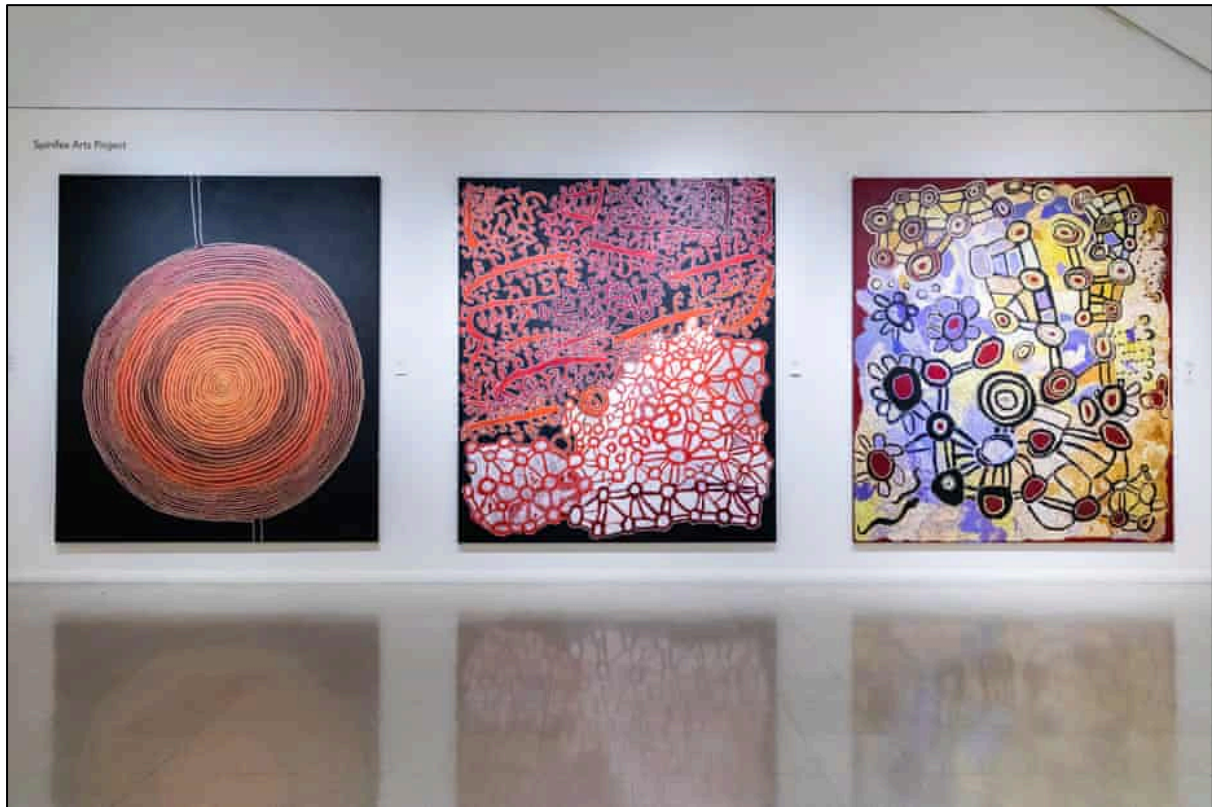
Claire Coleman
Thu 23 Sep 2021

I've just spent a week at the Desert Mob exhibitions and gathering in Mparntwe (Alice Springs): blogging about it, reporting on it, buying art and enjoying the art with the crowds of art lovers. There were about 10 events, across that many venues, featuring more than 100 artists from more than 20 Aboriginal art centres, many of them so remote that most of us could not even imagine what it is like living there. Although there were artists from town camps in Mparntwe, some were from as far away as the western end of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands near the three-way border of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

There's something you might have learned there, if you were paying attention. Aboriginal art from remote communities is always political, sharing love of country, hate of mining and anti-colonialism. I am not just referring to the art that falls into the "art about our stolen land is always political" category, although we must acknowledge

the politics inherent in Aboriginal people painting art about love of country during an apocalyptic colonisation.

Politics has always been embedded in renditions of Country, that show connection to Country, traditional ownership of land. They are political as long as settler colonialism is attempting to erase our connection to our homelands and culture, as long as stolen land has not been returned. It's a kind of resistance to this erasure, an open protest against land theft and its accompanying colonial accoutrements. All Indigenous art is a statement about our continued existence, an existence that must be erased for settler colonialism to win.



Artworks by artists of Spinifex Arts Project, in remote Tjuntjuntjara, WA.

We must also acknowledge the political will inherent in making traditional weapons (such as the women's club I bought on the weekend) that were stolen from Indigenous people by the colonisers and regularly end up in museum collections. Earlier this year I purchased for my collection a "club boomerang", an item many non-Indigenous people are not aware exists, a boomerang not made to throw but to use more like a sword. Most of the older versions of these items are in museum collections, having been taken from Aboriginal people by the colonisers who were armed with more dangerous methods of death dealing.

That I am really interested in are the overt political statements by Indigenous people who use the language of visual art to engage with politics, who perhaps speak English as a fifth language, whose voice has been erased except in their art. This, when I find it, is perhaps my favourite genre of Aboriginal art and may be a field that you are

unaware even exists, such as the late works of Pitjantjatjara artist Kunmanara Mike Williams.

There's an annual art award and exhibition: the opening and ceremony is the first event of the Desert Mob week, called the Vincent Lingiari Art Award. Even the name is political, the award named after one of the founders of land rights who led his Gurindji people to walk off Wave Hill station where they were slaves. They sat on a riverbank for eight years, waiting for land rights, eventually winning their land back. You may not know his name but you may have seen Vincent, in the famous photo by Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop of Gough Whitlam pouring a handful of sand into his hands.



Fabian Brown, part of the 'Tennant Creek Brio' at Nyinkka Nyunyu Art & Culture Centre, in front of his painting for Desert Mob 30, Sad Angel with his creatures, The Divine Dolphin, and The Red Hippo.

The theme of the exhibition this year was Ngawa, Ngapa, Kapi, Kwatja, Water, and the art presented was about the importance of water, of water rights. The entire cultural milieu of desert art was represented, their art about sacred water reminding us all that in the places that wadjela call the "desert", there is nothing more important than water. The art from this award unpacked land rights and water rights and environmental destruction.

All you have to do is look.

Protest is common across the entire world of Indigenous art, from the city to the place city folk imagine is the “bush”. It was always there, from the beginning. All you need to do is learn how to look at Aboriginal art, how to read the language. Once you know what you are looking for, you learn something important: Indigenous protest art is everywhere.

So don't be fooled by white commentators, columnists and colonisers, who would have you believe it is only rabble-rousers such as me, who they imagine as being from the city, who are political. The home of land rights is in the bush, in the NT, where Arrernte/Kalkadoon political figure Charlie Perkins was born, where the Gurindji call home, where the first land was handed back. Our art reflects this: classically raised Indigenous people, embedded in culture, some of whom grew up on country without western education, are fighting for our rights and have been for generations.

As long as we make art we are still here and the colony has not yet won.

Claire G. Coleman is a Noongar writer whose Country is the south coast of WA. She has published two novels, *Terra Nullius* and *The Old Lie*, and a nonfiction book, *Lies, Damned Lies*