Melbourne 2006: Marketing south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art

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Abstract  The Aboriginal cultural sector is dynamic and highly valuable to the Australian economy, returning an estimated $100 million dollars annually. The majority of Aboriginal artists and art works have been perceived to be in northern Australia—eighty per cent of them are in fact in this region—but Aboriginal artists in south-eastern Australia are emerging as a strong force as they struggle for recognition from commercial and national galleries, curators, art dealers, newspaper critics, and buyers. If marketing is to be effectual, the Aboriginality of the art must be presented in a form that is understood and accepted by the audience. Thus changing public perceptions is crucial to marketing south-eastern Aboriginal art. The primary task of this article is to discuss this marketing priority for Aboriginal art and artists in south-eastern Australia, previously neglected in marketing literature. Specifically, the upcoming Melbourne Commonwealth Games are proposed as an opportunity for intensive marketing of the region’s Aboriginal arts.

Biographies  Megan Cardamone is currently conducting doctoral research which examines entrepreneurship within Indigenous Australian cultural micro-enterprises. She has contributed to the cataloguing, conservation and strategic care of Indigenous cultural heritage collections for major Australian institutions, such as the National Gallery of Victoria and the Melbourne Museum and for the smaller Burrinja Aboriginal & Oceanic Gallery. An art historian, her previous academic research demonstrated the continuity of Victorian Koorie art-forms from pre-colonial to contemporary times.

Esmai Manahan is Manager of Koori Business Network, a discrete and important part of the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development in the Victorian government. Esmai was formally employed at Arts Victoria. She is Koori and was instrumental in developing the inaugural exhibition Tribal Expressions (2004) and the resulting exhibition catalogue Deadly Expressions published by Arts Victoria and the Koori Business Network. Esmai has spearheaded the marketing of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art in partnership with Arts Victoria and subsequently through the Commonwealth Games program, with great success.

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Introduction

Aboriginal Australians comprise 2.4 per cent of the national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002), and yet the Aboriginal cultural sector contributes a disproportionately large component of more than $100 million to the Australian economy annually, outstripping the income from non-Aboriginal artists by three to one (Altman and Ward 2002:67). This sector is not only vital to tourism, but is also globally unique and of social as well as economic value to Australia’s Aboriginal people. Yet until recently little attention has been given to Aboriginal art and artists from south-eastern Australia. This article fills that lacuna.

Australia joins a cohort of countries which have experienced a significant shift in investment and employment away from manufacturing and towards services. In addition, there has been a technological shift from labour-intensive industries to capital-intensive ones. Alongside this has emerged a greater commitment to leisure and recreation, fostering the growth and development of the art market. Accompanying these shifts in economic priority, Aboriginal communities across Australia are maintaining a significant voice in national and international affairs and increasingly demanding self-determination. Recognising the art and artists of south-eastern Australia is one way of pursuing this aim.

The Aboriginal art market plays a significant role both in promoting appreciation for the accomplishments of Aboriginal culture and within broader concepts of the export of a national culture (Myers 2002). Altman argues that an important turning point in the emergence of Aboriginal art onto the market occurred in the late 1970s, with national strategies occurring in the 1980s and beyond. The 1990s saw Aboriginal art move from an ethnographic to a high-art appreciation approach among fine art collectors; a growth in tourist art; and changes in policy towards Aboriginal art (Altman 2000). There was unprecedented growth in the high art segment of the market, which was valued at $2.5 million in 1980 and at $100 million in 2004. Such rapid growth and change has caused tensions in the industry. One of these tensions has been the focus on Aboriginal art from the northern, less populated end of the country, to the exclusion of art from the highly urbanised south-east of the country.

This article argues that a vibrant Aboriginal art market is emerging in south-eastern Australia. It then goes on to discuss imperatives for marketing to develop the industry. In conclusion, it points to future initiatives planned for the next stage of development. Support and commitment to Aboriginal art in south-eastern Australia is seen as fostering the creative industries and ensuring the active participation of a marginalised sector within society in an economically and culturally productive way.

Background

In the past twenty years there has been exponential growth in both the number and type of commercial and national galleries, auction houses and private collectors interested in Aboriginal art. The challenge for the twenty-first century is to maintain and extend the audience for Aboriginal art. Between 2003–2005 the following exhibitions of northern regions Indigenous art were presented at major south-eastern art institutions: No ordinary place: The art of David Malangi (National Gallery of Australia); Seeing the centre: The art of Albert Namatjira (National Gallery of Victoria); Rover Thomas (National Gallery of Victoria); Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (National Gallery of Victoria); Crossing country: The alchemy of Arnhem Land art (Art Gallery of New South Wales) and Colour power - Aboriginal art post 1984 (National Gallery of Victoria). Only three exhibitions at major institutions, Remembering Barak (National Gallery of Victoria 2003), In Honour of Lin Onus (Melbourne Museum 2002–2005) and Urbaninity (Melbourne Museum 2004) have been devoted to south-eastern Aboriginal artists, or featured them in a major way, in recent years. A Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, exhibition of work by Destiny Deacon is touring in 2005, but it is touring New Zealand and New Caledonia rather than Australia.
Melbourne is a centre for experiencing art and culture, including appreciation of Aboriginal culture. But primarily it has hosted the creative offerings of Aboriginal artists from regions other than the south-east. Of course there are exceptions to this: Julie Gough, Destiny Deacon, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, and Clinton Nain are south-eastern artists who have exhibited successfully in Melbourne, mostly via the commercial Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. Their small number of exhibitions contrast to high volumes of sales and exhibitions from the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Desert regions. Koori Heritage Trust CEO Jason Eades states:

It is usually Top End art that is promoted by galleries in Collins St. They are showing great examples of Aboriginal art, it’s just a shame that they are not giving as much attention to Victorian Aboriginal art (Couzens 2004: 7).

In the past decade or so, this has begun to change. It could be argued that Boomalli Arts Co-operative in Sydney began the artist-led charge for change in the early nineties. The National Gallery of Victoria has bolstered its collection of south-eastern artists, most recently with interest in Brook Andrew. The commercial gallery, Alcaston Gallery, has exhibited south-eastern artists Craig Charles and Ray Thomas. Museum Victoria’s flagship site Melbourne Museum opened in 2000 with Birrirung, a dedicated south-eastern Aboriginal art exhibition space within its Bunjilaka section. National art prizes, such as Telstra national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art award and The art of place: National Indigenous heritage art award, have embraced urban and rural artists from Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and NSW.

Changing perceptions of south-eastern Aboriginal art and gaining recognition for those artists are marketing challenges. Some of the false perceptions about south-eastern Australian art are discussed later in this paper. Dismantling these is an important path towards audience development and also a remedy to stereotypical views of Aboriginal art generally.

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**Growth in audiences for south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art**

This brief review of the background highlights the need to market south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art, recognising that audience depends on institutional change in purchasing and collecting policies and marketing through the secondary art market, such as at auction houses. Recognition of this issue encouraged the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria to work cooperatively on a range of initiatives in order to raise awareness of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art, improve its reputation and find markets for it. Interestingly, they also sought to market both male and female artists. In fact, well over half the artists in the inaugural exhibition were female. Three of those artists, those whose reputation have grown through the successful marketing of their art and the development of their skills as marketers of their own work, are women. Australia Council research has shown that the audience for contemporary Aboriginal art is predominantly female, thus a useful gender connection may possibly be exploited through strategic marketing of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art, to mutual artist–audience benefit (Australia Council 2003: 67)

National and international recognition of art and artists through exhibitions at national and respected commercial galleries is one way reputations are marketed to the public. Another aspect of the visibility and presence of art and artists is the perceived relationship between the artform and the community to which it belongs. If art and artists are invisible, by not being present in national collections, there is no opportunity for the reputation of artists to improve and prices of their art to increase. The marketing project to raise awareness of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art and artists seeks to overcome this problem. Connections are established between artists, galleries and audience as part of a continuing program that started with the exhibition Deadly Expressions and continues to the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games.
Marketing south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art to institutional collectors

In Australia, government departments and arts funding bodies are used to build reputations, audiences and the value of Aboriginal art. This is done by seeking to influence national galleries to acquire or purchase south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art. It is an important mechanism for changing public acceptance of art and increasing its value to potential buyers from the secondary market, such as auction houses.

A significant factor is that the network of government-subsidised community ‘art centres’ does not extend properly into south-eastern areas, especially urban areas. The rationale is that these are needed where infrastructure, language, and lack of business knowledge would otherwise prevent Aboriginal artists from making and distributing work. This situation is most pronounced in very remote and isolated areas and where the artists are living within highly traditional structures and customary laws. However some of these issues (infrastructure, business acumen) have relevance for Aboriginal artists in urban and regional areas in the south east. Since major collectors and institutions generally go to the art centres for acquisitions, being outside of the art centre network is a barrier to increased collecting of south-eastern work.

An increase in demand for south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art resulted from a promotional exhibition in 2004, conducted jointly by the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria (the state government arts funding and advisory body). The dual interaction between art and business attracted attention as part of the professionalisation of the arts sector and the expansion of the business sector into Aboriginal arts.

The exhibition of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal artists called Deadly Expressions occurred in 2004, in a jointly funded project between the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria. It profiled 33 artists in an exhibition at Arts Victoria’s offices in Southbank, Melbourne. The resulting exhibition catalogue, Deadly Expressions (Manahan et al. 2004), ensured that eight artworks were purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria and major government contracts were obtained by particular artists in the exhibitions, such as Vicki Couzens. The exhibition and marketing of selected south-eastern Australian Aboriginal artists acted to promote their reputation in the art marketplace. The key to developing artists’ reputations is to be marketed in a wider market, and sponsored exhibitions are a sound way of doing that. These art policy decisions ensured the inclusion of more artists in the National Gallery of Victoria, which until then held few art works by south-eastern Australian Aboriginal artists. The process for establishing an artist’s reputation in different markets nonetheless remains a challenge (van den Bosch 2005), as the audience for the exhibition at the Arts Victoria offices is insufficient to build a large support base. The reputations of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal artists have not been dominant in the art market and will remain little known until an exhibition in a major public gallery remedies this lacuna. However, the marketing of groups of artists with a definitive style is leading to changes in institutional collecting practices.

Changing public perceptions of south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art

In a fundamental sense, the marketing of this art direct to audiences is an educative, perhaps corrective, task. Successful marketing must take the approach of ‘busting’ incorrect and damaging misconceptions. The central misconception that has led to neglect of south-eastern art is that art from these regions is somehow lesser or ‘not authentic’ Aboriginal art. This form of questioning ‘authenticity’ in Aboriginal art is symptomatic of a larger prejudice which still wants to regard Aboriginal Australians as somehow ‘primitive’, at best ‘exotic’ or restricted to a stereotypical image. It is not the same as the legitimate ‘authenticity’ campaign designed to weed out non-Indigenous rip-offs and copyright violations. Painter Ian Waldron (2005) expresses that Aboriginal artists in settled areas,
Work very hard at not having their work viewed as watered down versions of the ‘true’ Aboriginal art done by ‘real’ Aborigines. They seek to have their place, physical and historical, recognised for what it is. The lives of all Australian Aborigines changed irreversibly post-colonisation. They are not primitive people and they are not ‘other’ to the ‘rest’ of Australia. Social constructs of who Aborigines are have not kept pace with the sophistication of the art they are producing. (Waldron 2005)

So how can marketers bust the ‘mis-perceptions’ that surround south-eastern art? The best way is through the art itself. This is artist Julie Gough’s approach, as she proposes more touring exhibitions in Australia. She claims that,

Touring exhibitions last long enough to encourage thoughtful visitation and re-visitiation, are visited by lots of different people and school groups and often build in education programs and possible artist talk programs that also all work to change misconceptions or lack of awareness about the strength and diversity and existence of contemporary south-eastern Indigenous creative practices (Gough 2005).

One after-effect of more touring exhibitions or exhibitions showcasing a range of contemporary practice from around Australia might be that commercial galleries are more encouraged to represent south-eastern artists. For example, Lorraine Northey Connelly’s nomination in the RAKA award resulted in her exhibiting at Koorie Heritage Trust and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi (Gough 2005).

As already mentioned, the success of high-quality exhibitions such as Deadly Expressions, and the subsequent flow-on via acquisitions by major public institutions is absolutely vital in changing public perceptions. But acquisitions are not enough. There is an undeniable correlation between false perceptions of south-eastern Aboriginal people and their art. The following are some of the public ‘mis-perceptions’ encountered by the authors during many years of work and research in this field.

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**Mis-perception #1: Art from South-Eastern Australia is not ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art**

Reality: Aboriginal art is authentic if it is made by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Aboriginal populations were moved from their traditional homelands as a result of colonisation in south-eastern areas of Australia. However, the deep links with these places remain. Since the mission period, ‘Aboriginal people have continued to live in most areas of Victoria, often with strong ties to their original clan and tribal areas’ (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria 2005). Caramone (2000) has argued that the artist’s country is a central theme in much south-eastern Aboriginal art. Treahnna Hamm and Lin Onus have fervently illustrated their connections to the Barmah Forest. Through totems and symbols, which are often based on the people, places of significance and plant and animal life of their country, these artists demonstrate their connection with their country. Artist Julie Gough, temporarily living in Townsville, builds natural rafts on which she can metaphorically (or literally) float back home to Tebrikunna in Tasmania (Gough in Cross Currents exhibition essay 2005).

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**Mis-perception #2: Local stylistic traditions from the south-east have been lost.**

Reality: South-eastern cultures suffered heavily from colonisation, especially in terms of loss of languages and suppression of cultural practices, but many practices quietly continued uninterrupted, particularly women’s crafts. In the south-east, artists have also drawn on knowledge and technique about their visual heritage from south-eastern weapon and artefact collections in institutions such as Museum Victoria. Traditional art of south-eastern Australia is more linear in nature, does not use dots or cross-hatching in the same way as central desert styles.
Weaving artists such as Aunty Dot Peters and Patricia Harrison make vessels using pre-colonial techniques passed to them by older relatives. Cape Barren artists Muriel Maynard and Dulcie and Lola Greeno credit their mothers and grandmothers for the traditional knowledge needed to make their complex shell jewellery. For Lola Greeno, ‘the shell necklaces are the most significant thing to Tasmanian Aboriginal history because they are the continuing craft of our community that’s never been lost, at least not by the Island women anyway’ (Greeno 2002). Traditional design forms exist from pre-colonial times on shields, in baskets, and on weapons as well as in various rock art/engraving sites in the south-east.

Like many Indigenous artists, south-eastern artists of Aboriginal heritage construct their aesthetic output from varying combinations of Western art practice, Indigenous forms and their own aesthetic invention. Work by artists such as Julie Gough, Clinton Nain, Gail Maddigan, Destiny Deacon and Leann Edwards demonstrates this. There is no obligation which forces an Aboriginal-identifying artist to produce ‘Aboriginal-looking’ art, whatever an audience may conceive that to mean. Contemporary and/or urban work by Indigenous artists may reflect the varied experiences or expressionistic choices of the artist, their work may or may not incorporate references to their traditional totems or stories.

As these few examples illustrate, appropriate marketing must dispel ill-informed perceptions at public, institutional and government levels in order to achieve what Terry Moran, Secretary of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet called ‘greater recognition of the individuality, vibrancy and integrity of Victoria’s Indigenous contemporary arts practice’ (Moran 2003).

Marketing south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art to Commonwealth Games audiences

The 18th Commonwealth Games are to be held in Melbourne in March 2006. The Games will bring to Australia over 6000 athletes, coaches and team officials, and large numbers of VIPs from 71 Commonwealth countries and territories. Over 1 million spectators are expected to attend, thousands of these, international visitors. Over 3000 local and international media will visit Melbourne to report on the Games. Over 5000 service providers and up to 15,000 volunteers are expected to support the staging of the Games. A worldwide television audience of over 1 billion people is expected during the eleven days of action. 90,000 visitors (40,000 international and 50,000 interstate) are expected to visit Melbourne to witness the Games.

Thus, this major international event is a unique but brief opportunity to showcase south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art forms to vast domestic and global audiences. If successful, the repercussions of this marketing would extend exponentially for south-eastern Aboriginal arts.

The establishment of policy initiatives that foster cooperation across government departments may be the best way to market south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art for the Games. Bolstering artist enterprises and providing supportive funding will become important too in terms of producing work in greater volumes for greater audiences. (Liddle 2005). As a result of this, marketing practices for south-eastern Australian Aboriginal art have become directed at critical reception at major events, such as the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games.

The marketing strategy for the Games has triple aims. Firstly it addresses the issue of maker-authenticity by introducing a recognisable ‘swing-tag’. The tag can be used by artisans who have been registered and their credentials reviewed by a state government department. This provides a visual reassurance to Games visitors that they are not buying inauthentic material made by non-Aboriginal persons. However, it also fulfils the role of a quality assurance mechanism, providing an authority that approves and confirms the quality and value of south-eastern work.
The second aim in the marketing strategy has been to put the work in front of audiences. The third has been to use the Games as an opportunity for Aboriginal practitioners and arts enterprises to make long-term business connections. The Koori Business Network (KBN) worked with the Office of the Commonwealth Games Coordination (OCGC) to ensure that Victorian Aboriginal businesses and communities would gain lasting benefits from the Games. The result was a series of three ‘Indigenous Showcases’. The aim was to expose Games visitors to Victorian Aboriginal cultural expressions and traditions, and to allow the artists and practitioners to forge important business relationships and link into networks locally and internationally. The second and third showcases (Arts Showcase and Performing Arts Showcase) fulfilled the second aim of presenting examples of south-eastern Indigenous arts and performance. The first showcase, the ‘Indigenous Business Showcase’, provides the opportunity for south-eastern Aboriginal cultural practitioners to establish business links with local and overseas interests. It also presents several Koori small business success stories to demonstrate the capacity and creativity of these enterprises. An outdoor Sunday Aboriginal art market is also planned for the final weekend of the Games period.

The showcases and market will be held at venues in the hub of the city of Melbourne and its adjacent cultural precinct (Federation Square, the Arts Centre’s Black Box Theatre and Lawn and Stage). The venues are therefore in locations that will be heavily trafficked by target audiences during the Games period. To bolster both aims of these showcase programs, print catalogues will be produced that display colour images of arts, crafts and performances and which contain enterprise contact information for interested business parties.

The Victorian Government committed $4.5 million to local councils so that each could create programs and events that link in with the Games. One of these initiatives has been the careful negotiation of a cultural trail called the Bayside Indigenous Trail. It is to be developed and launched for the Games and remain thereafter as a legacy of both the Games and of the area’s Aboriginal heritage. Once the specifications and content were outlined, an Aboriginal Victorian artist was to be selected to design an aesthetic concept for the trail. The City of Melbourne municipal government grant supported an exhibition of south-eastern Aboriginal art called Biganga at the Melbourne Museum intended to coincide with the Games. The Aboriginal Galleries at Federation Square were completely rehung to re-open for the Games with a retrospective of great figures in Australian Aboriginal art. The exhibition features work by south-eastern artists William Barak, Tommy Mcrae, Lorrainne Connelly-Northey, Brook Andrew, Clinton Nain and Lin Onus.

Another link-in event to the Games has south-eastern Aboriginal traditions represented. As part of the $12 million Victorian and Federal Government funded festival Melbourne 2006, ‘members of the public will be able to take part in artist-led workshops (including) traditional indigenous carving’ (Kemp 2005).

As stated previously, common misperceptions about south-eastern Aboriginal arts have to be challenged head-on. The 2006 Commonwealth Games is a great opportunity to do so and to expose the work to large audiences. The strategic marketing for the Games is directed at establishing a sense of authenticity, exposing the art and performance to audiences and developing the small enterprises that are proudly south-eastern.

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