Positioning urban Aboriginal art in the Australian Indigenous art market

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Abstract This paper investigates perceptions about urban Aboriginal art and its place in the Australian Indigenous art market, illustrating that these perceptions change depending upon the viewers' relative position. It argues that the estrangement of urban Aboriginal art from work identified as traditional has much to do with the perceived yawning chasm (both spatial and cultural) between traditional artists and the rest of the world, and that this gulf has been emphasised in the process of the management of the Aboriginal art market. A key finding of this paper is that the process of defining urban Aboriginal art brings into review existing assumptions about Aboriginal art and the environments it is created in.

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The category ‘urban Aboriginal art’ was announced in the latter 1980s to counter the perception that the only authentic Aboriginal art was ‘tribal’ art from the desert and the top end. This categorisation made a necessary statement at a particular point in time, but the endurance of the term has since become problematic. Books and encyclopedias on Aboriginal art are organised ‘geographically’ under the chapter headings Kimberley, Central Desert, Top End, Tasmania – and Urban. As the curator Djon Mundine has wondered, ‘Where is urbania?’ One might as well ask where is suburbania, as the indigenous experience is as likely to be exurban or rural as metropolitan or outback (Fink 1999).

Australian Aboriginal art falls into either the urban or the traditional category. ‘Urban’ is used to describe artwork created by Aboriginal artists living in cities and towns that uses predominantly Western media and styles and expresses contemporary themes. The term ‘traditional Aboriginal art’ is used to refer to artwork employing imagery and styles used in or relating to designs and themes associated with ceremony and ancient cultural traditions. Traditional work is created by Aboriginal Australians living in a range of locations, from urban to remote, employing both Western media and materials used traditionally. ‘Traditional’ is increasingly replaced by the term ‘classical’. While urban and traditional Aboriginal art may be ostensibly very different, the common heritage of the artists is the important unifying factor.

Urban Aboriginal art is positioned in the art market very differently to traditional Aboriginal art. Using the literature on urban Aboriginal art, this paper examines the
place of urban Aboriginal art in the Australian Indigenous art market. An examination of
the dialogue of urban Aboriginal artists reveals that there is more similarity than
difference between the motivations of urban and traditional artists. The gulf between
urban and traditional art forms is not necessarily as huge as it is perceived. This paper
examines how dominant perceptions about Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal art have
worked to ‘place’ urban Aboriginal art in the Australian Indigenous art market, and
suggests that working to employ a more realistic, less romantic representation of
Aboriginal people in the management of the industry could facilitate better acceptance
of urban Aboriginal art as an integral component of Aboriginal art as a whole, rather
than a watered down distant relative.

‘Urban’ is one of a number of labels attached to Indigenous art that is too general to do
justice to the work that falls under its heading. It could be described as art by artists
who work and live in an urban setting. This is the best point at which to end
generalisations about artists in this ‘grouping’, as their backgrounds, motivations and
artistic styles are incredibly diverse. Urban Aboriginal art is not new and has been
around for as long as Aboriginal artists have been producing art in urban settings,
clearly predating the emergence of the acrylic on canvas movement which threw
temporary Aboriginal art into the spotlight. Early urban artists include William Barak,
Tommy McRae, Albert Namatjira, Ronald Bull, Thancoupie (Gloria Fletcher), Dick
Roughsey and Harold Thomas. The work of early urban artists was often not
considered to be ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art (Morphy 1998: 320), and the term still carries
these connotations (Morphy 1998: 380). Urban Aboriginal artists currently enjoying a
high profile include Tracey Moffatt, Rea, Gordon Bennett, Ian Waldron, Bronwyn
Bancroft, Richard Bell, Brook Andrew, Fiona Foley and Destiny Deacon. In contrast to
the financial assistance that has been afforded to community arts centres, city-based
Aboriginal artists have been largely self-funded, working independently or banding
together in groups such as Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.

Indigenous Australians comprise 2.4% of the total Australian population (Australian
outside major urban centres as compared to 36% of the total population (ABS 1996b). While
49.5% of the Indigenous population live in Outer Regional, Remote and Very
Remote areas (ABS 2004), 70% live in urban areas, a figure that is comprised of 27%
in capital cities and 43% in other urban areas (ABS 1996a), with other urban areas
comprising ‘all centres with a total population of less than 1,000 people and over
excluding capital cities’ (ABS 1996a). While the statistic of 70% of the Indigenous
population living in urban areas may seem misleading, as many of the areas included
would not conform to typical urban settings, the figure could have real application in the
Aboriginal art industry in dispelling romantic stereotypes of Aboriginal people living
primitive lives untouched by modern society.

There are very real social and economic implications for the 70 per cent of the
Indigenous population living outside of major urban centres. In a discussion paper
prepared for the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy, Professor Jon Altman reports
that:

Many Indigenous communities are in extremely remote locations, far from urban
centres, formal labour markets, and commercial opportunities. There are
indications that over the past three decades employment opportunities in the
rural sector have declined rapidly and Indigenous Australians are likely to have
been disproportionately affected given their already marginal status (Altman
2000: 9).

In these communities art is one of the few means of economic independence. While art
has become an important source of income and form of cultural expression,
dependence on art as a source of income makes it easy for the market to dictate to
artists what it demands. This is not to say that artists in community settings are not
innovative with highly distinctive personal styles, which is so obviously the case, but
rather that urban artists have relatively more access to additional employment and alternatives for marketing their art, affording them greater freedom in their choice of theme and style of expression.

Urban Aboriginal art is important because it one of the few forums for the representation of contemporary life through the eyes of one of the most marginalised sectors of the Australian population. Despite being an important and very exciting record of contemporary life, urban Aboriginal art is still very much in the shadows of the better known traditional Aboriginal art. In describing what he views as being behind the phenomenal success of Aboriginal art, art critic Benjamin Genocchio gives some insight into why urban Aboriginal art has not yet been saturated by the full limelight cast on traditional Aboriginal art:

Whether we like it or not, much of the desire for Aboriginal art crystallises around … [a] cocktail of exoticism, primitivism, redemption and innocence, which in turn perpetuates derogatory ideas of Aboriginal art as a racial curio fetishised as the production of an authentic spirit. Witness, for instance, the number of times you hear claims as to how old Aboriginal art is (popular refrain trumpets that the pyramids are only 4000 years old but the rock paintings in the Kimberley go back 10,000 years), or ask yourself why, up until Dreamings in 1988, almost no important art show included any living or urban-based artists and were in ethnographic museums … To say that Aboriginal art is the last, curious exponent of the colonialist primitive is not to denigrate it but to insist that a misty veil of exoticism and strangeness still clouds its interpretation and display, and in many ways is the secret of its allure (Genocchio 2001: B03).

Australia’s involvement in the musee du Quai Branly, Frances’ new museum for non-Western art, has revealed that the primitivist approach still is very much alive and well. ‘[T]he terms ‘primal art’ and ‘primitive art’ are used throughout the museum’s literature’(Neill 2004: F14). Primitivist attitudes have not gone unnoticed by Indigenous Australian curators working on the project, Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft:

Croft says those at the French end of this project have sometimes betrayed a ‘primitivist’ view of indigenous art. However, she also thinks that ‘they’re trying to deal with it, and they know they have to come up to speed’ … Croft says that she and Perkins are determined to show the French that ‘indigenous art is not static and that it represents some of the most excellent work coming out of Australia today’ (Neill 2004: F14).

Jennifer Isaacs observes that:

On the international stage, notions of antiquity, primordial human visual communication or cultural practices that extend through millennia constantly enter discourses – indeed, they remain the entry point for significant international collectors (Isaacs 2002: 550).

While Indigenous artists speak of primitivism and stereotyping of Indigenous artists and their art in Australia and overseas, Australian non-Indigenous commentators are inclined to see this as largely resolved in the domestic context, and more of a problem overseas (see Isaacs 2002, pp. 549–550; Morphy 1998, 417–418 for example). However, there is much to suggest that the domestic representations of Aboriginal people and their art could be reassessed and updated. Richard Bell asserts:

My journey is to challenge the symbolism within this country, because we get this generation after generation of racists and I am trying to put some circuit breakers in to stop that. My audience is young Anglo-Saxon (Bell cited in ABC Online, 2003).
In his paper 'Brokering Aboriginal art: A Critical Perspective on Marketing, Institutions, and the State', Professor Jon Altman reports on the history, functions and implications for the future of the role of Aboriginal community arts centres. Altman states that:

*Most Indigenous art is produced in such situations where there is a geographic distance between the artist and their prospective audiences. There is also a cultural distance between the Aboriginal artists and the purchasers who are generally non-Aboriginal – the artists and the buyers often speak different languages and there is little basis for communication, let alone unmediated exchange. Consequently, selling Aboriginal art requires careful and considered mediation over vast geographic and cultural distance (Altman 2005: 2).*

There is of course an important role for art centres. However, rather than attributing the need for unmediated exchange between artist and buyer purely to ‘vast cultural distances’, it should be noted that this need can also be attributed to factors such as (A) Australian Aboriginals are an Indigenous minority facing gross economic and social disadvantage that place obvious restrictions on access to the market that transcend spatial distance and that (B) control over the Aboriginal art market is jealously guarded by non-Indigenous people making considerable financial gains from their involvement, further limiting avenues of access for Aboriginal Australians.

It is easy to distance the otherness of Aboriginal art, perceive that it is from a totally separate world, definable ‘real’ Aboriginal art that is over there, somewhere else. This ethnographic mindset discounts the static nature of culture and hinders our access to and appreciation of the spectrum of Aboriginal art. If Aboriginal art is seen in one cultural realm and Western art in another space, where does urban Aboriginal art fit in? If all Aboriginal art was viewed in its actual context of being produced in a country where the impact on the first Australians by subsequent Australians has been immeasurable, it would not be so difficult to contextualise urban Aboriginal art. Hannah Fink observes:

*Urban Aboriginal art, one could claim, is as fictive a category as the many figments of imagination that comprise what is understood by most non-Indigenous Australians as being Aboriginal. Representations of indigenous people are not only part of Australia’s imaginary but most often are literally imaginary, part of the nation’s mythic unseen (Fink, 1999).*

Urban artists encounter the belief that Aboriginal cultures are dying and that true Aboriginal art is only produced by people living in remote communities, in short it is up against all of the stereotypes attached to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal art. It is not surprising that urban artists are uncomfortable about the perceived estrangement of urban Aboriginal artists from their cultural heritage because they work in the city. Artists express this discomfort and defend the legitimacy of their cultural expression in different ways. Richard Bell chooses to directly articulate his beliefs in his artwork and in supporting writing. In his *Bell's Theorem* he writes:

*Consider the classification of ‘Urban Aboriginal Art’. This is the work of people descended from the original owners of the heavily populated areas of the continent. Through a brutal colonisation process much of the culture has disappeared. However what has survived is important. The ‘Dreamtime’ is the past, the present and the future. The Urban Artists are still telling their ‘Dreamtime’ stories, albeit contemporary ones (Bell 2004: 22).*

In contrast, Ian Waldron’s approach is subtle, but just as powerful. While working in a range of highly innovative styles and employing a distinctive visual language, reference is made to personally significant cultural links, such as his clan totem, the Bloodwood tree:

*The paintings and three-dimensional bloodwood trees in the ‘Bloodwood Totem’ series are sophisticated and elegant, organic and yet completely man-made. The paintings have a three-dimensional immediacy that gives the work a larger-than-
life quality, almost at odds with the natural world. From nature, the artist has abstracted the most exotic and sumptuous elements to present something that is 'super-real'. This is the contemporary Aboriginal artist making a declaration of the legitimacy of his links to country, an honest portrayal of the natural world through urban eyes. There is a calm and ethereal reverence in these works, strongly paralleling the painting of totems (a natural element connecting a human to the spiritual world) in traditional life, a practice that was part of maintaining a harmony and equilibrium necessary for survival (Chapman 2004: 117).

While Bell and Waldron use very different approaches, both defiantly defend their rights to their Aboriginal identity, asserting that there is no formula or 'style' for its expression. Indigenous photographer Christian Thompson similarly expresses his belief that there is a need to update perceptions of the Aboriginal identity:

This idea of 'Blakness' is an 'either/or' policy and for Europeans it is easier to polarize 'Blak' identity than to recognize contemporary indiginity as a multicultural concept. To be urban, Aboriginal and active in society but retain an indigenous identity is considered a volatile combination. Aborigines in urban environs are most political and dangerous to the establishment when we are simply 'ourselves' (Thompson 2004: 107).

In a 2002 article about contemporary urban artist Jonathan Jones, Sharon Verghis poses the question:

Why are so many works of urban Aboriginal artists based on experiences of growing up black in the city, not the bush, dismissed as 'unauthentic' while a more traditional style of painting fetches price records and praise? What is black art and what isn't? (Verghis 2002: M12).

In response, Jones asserts that:

My life and culture is just as valid and important as any other...The statement 'you have lost your culture' disturbs me as, in fact, it is an impossibility to lose your culture...What is being insinuated is that you are not living up to naïve stereotypical ideas of Aboriginality. Urban Aboriginal culture is just as legitimate as any other culture and deserves the same respect and acknowledgement (Jones cited in Verghis 2002: M12).

Urban Aboriginal artists clearly share the same strong connection and pride to their heritage as artists working in more remote locations, many of whom are far more urban than non-Indigenous people perceive them to be. Narrowing this gap between what is perceived to be the strictly separate worlds of city-based and remote Aboriginal people brings into alignment the work of urban artists with what is considered to be traditional art, dispelling the myth that urban Aborigines, or indeed urban white Australians, and Aborigines in more remote locations, are from mutually exclusive worlds. Dispelling this myth does not in any way deny the rich cultural heritage of Aboriginal people, but rather highlights the fact that all Aboriginal people in Australia exist in a dominant culture which is not the Indigenous culture, and that their way of life has a great deal more in common with the rest of Australia than is commonly portrayed in the Aboriginal arts industry.

Exhibiting urban works with more familiar Aboriginal art styles in both public and private galleries could ease the audience into an understanding of the art as being an evolution of traditional Aboriginal art forms. Not all artists would favour this approach, as many urban artists choose not to display their work in specifically Aboriginal galleries, exhibitions and prizes, and fight hard to have the work accepted on its own terms. Indeed, urban Aboriginal artists should not have to rely on having their work in these environments to have it accepted as Aboriginal art. In a 1995 interview, Ann McGrath talked to Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft about market expectations:
Ann: I can imagine with any sort of gallery that might be more Western in its orientation, rather than more sensitive to indigenous peoples or third-world peoples or whatever, they might want you to present something which you don’t believe in. Like for example, I can imagine that the Big Dreamings exhibition in New York, might well have appealed to the people looking for the sort of primitivist truth and spiritual reality that Westerners were looking for which is sort of somewhat of a mythical cultural ideal.

Hetti: Certainly. A good example of this was when we were in England…they just thought it was going to be all I think dots and barks and that the education program would probably take the form of you know, probably animal tracks and things like that…so as you say I think they were expecting this quite safe exhibition that would sort of, satisfied this desire for primitivism.

Brenda: Well, it’s that crap you know, it’s like the unchartered, the unknown …

Ann: The lost tribe …

Brenda: Which is what bloody British explorers always been on about anyway, it’s like Dr Livingstone and all that, finally from down south, the last untouched nomads are going to come up here and show us how to get back to grips with our spirituality. Then you come there and you just throw it back in their face and this is what’s happened and like Australians don’t even understand this history, let alone you guys (McGrath 1995: 225–6).

Misrepresentation of and generalisation about Aboriginal artists’ identity limits the ability of the artists to express their identity fully. Indeed a strong theme amongst urban artists is the fluidity of identity, that identity is not a set of cultural traditions, a place or a painting style, and is just as complex and inexplicable for Indigenous people as it is for anyone else:

A requisite for self-definition must be liberation not only from the incarcerations of stereotype and the burden of having to perform or translate a self for a nominal white audience, but freedom from the onus of having to define oneself at all. This very ordinary liberty can only be of critical importance to a people who historically have been categorised and pathologised: as ‘full-blood’ or ‘half-caste’, as ‘primitive’ or ‘extinct’, or, in the parlance of contemporary statistics, as uneducated and unemployed (Fink 1999).

Is the market ready for the direct dialogue between Aboriginal artists and the white audience, one where there is no mediator, translator or broker? Urban Aboriginal artists seek to communicate their dialogue directly without translation. While it is argued that mediators and translation is needed for practical reasons for artists working in communities (see Altman 2005 for example), it is at the same time a form of control, and there is always something lost (or added?) in translation. It is precisely this non-Indigenous translation that urban artists seek to bypass, to communicate with clarity on their own terms:

So much of Aboriginal discourse has been patiently tailored to the ignorance of non-indigenous people: the unspoken context for Aboriginal utterance is white ignorance. Almost every aspect of communication involves negotiation and translation; between cultures, within cultures, between the past and present. While white Australia hungrily appropriates and rewrites indigenous culture by translating it into its own terms, whether those of new ageism or of modernism, or by denying history or refusing to apologise for the stolen children, contemporary
indigenous artists deploy strategies which create the possibility of a sediment of meaning or selfhood that cannot be mediated or disturbed...ways of seeing through white Australia’s hall of mirrors, capturing aspects of cultural difference that are intranslatable – inscrutable even. The result is that most desirable of personal qualities: self-possession (Fink 1999).

Urban artists are stylistically diverse and many individual artists work in a range of styles, from what could be interpreted as traditional through to realism. This brings into question the criteria used to label Aboriginal artwork and what styles have come to be considered traditional and modern, and that traditional work is ‘more Aboriginal’. Janet Maughan observes:

[]It is not the medium that defines ‘Aboriginality’. Aboriginal artists work on canvas, on paper, on textiles and in two and three dimensions. The materials and media are selected to ensure that their point of view can be heard. The choice does not impact on ‘authenticity’: the purpose for which it is made may be different than it used to be when the materials were bark and ochres but the work is certainly Aboriginal in origin and statement … Aboriginal artists (as do all artists) simply choose whatever medium is most appropriate to their need (Maughan 2001: 5).

The distinction here is that tradition is often more a case of meaning than style or materials. Another important distinction is that tradition does not equate with cultural expression. Aboriginal artists may express aspects of their experience of Aboriginality without direct reference to traditional knowledge. Many styles that have come to be known as traditional Aboriginal art could in another context be abstract contemporary paintings. All Aboriginal artwork being painted is indeed contemporary as all artists engage with the contemporary world and none have been frozen in time, untouched by the outside world, despite what romanticised promotional literature might have the market believe.

The enduring perception that traditional works are those that best represent the Aboriginal identity is reflected in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art award. The award is Australia’s richest and most prestigious art award for Indigenous Australians and being awarded a prize can have profound effects on the career of the artist. The award has been criticised for being unrepresentative. Here Nicholas Rothwell comments on the 2005 exhibition:

Entrenched tendencies have surfaced with a vengeance, and their effects are impossible to miss. The rage burns for ‘novelty’, for new styles, for new painting regions deep in the desert, while demand for work – any work – by ‘name’ artists is equally fierce. In this sharks’ frenzy, speculative middlemen and buccaneer dealers flourish: for art has become almost the sole viable economic activity across much of the indigenous world…Urban Aboriginal artists are almost painfully obliged to make their ethnic identity the raison d’etre of their art (Rothwell 2005: F16).

Miriam Cosic is no less critical in her assessment of the state of affairs the previous year:

Some younger artists no longer want to be pigeonholed as Aboriginal artists, but want to succeed as artists, full stop. The show doesn’t work as a survey because some of the most interesting artists, certainly most of the edgy younger practitioners, and those working in photography and mixed media in particular don’t enter. Nor is it geographically comprehensive: there were few artists from Queensland, even fewer from the southeastern states and none from the Torres Strait this year. On the other hand, there were five artists from Bidyadanga, a remote Western Australian community producing vibrant idiosyncratically coloured canvases, which have shot up in price in the last 12 months (Cosic 2004: F7).
Again in 2005 Cosic questions the criteria of the award:

> Read the wall panels that accompany the works on show. The top half situates the artist in his or her language group, moiety and community, reflecting a continuing ethnographic interest in art and the people who make it. The lower half explains the spiritual narrative contained. One part is about ethnic origins, the other about religion: who would dare judge the artist's competence in either field? (Cosic 2005: F18).

Many urban artists are aware that the perception of Aboriginal art is still that of traditional work produced in remote areas and realise that they do not fit into this category. They are also aware that urban works are rarely awarded prizes, with the main prize being awarded to an urban artist only twice in 20 years. The last urban artist to win the award was Richard Bell who scooped the top prize in 2003 with his painting titled *Scientia E Metaphysica* (*Bell's Theorem*), which is emblazoned with the words, ‘Aboriginal art, it’s a white thing’. The painting was controversial, and many saw it as biting the hand that feeds. One report observed:

> His painting spat, at least indirectly, in the face of the institution that founded and has kept the award going all these years. The Northern Territory Art Gallery, with visionary curator of Aboriginal art Margie West in the driving seat, is recognised as a hugely influential force in an indigenous art market estimated to turn over at least $100m a year (Bagnall 2003).

Bell was certainly a contrast to the reserved, softly spoken winners of years past, as one journalist observed:

> Richard is a different kind of artist from his predecessors. He’s a brash, Brisbane-based, in-your-face, politically aware kind of artist – a larrikin spirit who uses his art to talk about injustice, oppression and inequality (Banks 2003).

Bell's painting was accompanied by *Bell’s Theorem*, a document expressing his views on Aboriginal art and the Indigenous art industry, and it came as a surprise to many to find that the artist expected it to be read:

> Bell is certainly breaking new ground in publishing an essay to explain his painting and quite a few eyebrows were raised among journalists at the media preview who were tackled by the artist as to whether they had read the essay (Banks 2003).

However, what caused more of a stir than the text in his painting was the words on the T-shirt that Bell wore to accept his award which read 'white girls can’t hump'. The awards sponsor, Telstra, did not challenge the artist about this:

> Telstra NT General Manager Danny Honon said the T-shirt was ‘what Richard Bell does’. ‘He also made a statement with his artwork,’ he said. ‘It was great to see that he didn’t try and change himself just for the art awards. Artists live on the edge and they want to make statements and who are we to stop them – we are trying to produce a platform for them to make those statements (Hinde 2003).

The response was surprisingly broad-minded in the context of what is often regarded as a very conservative and unrepresentative award.

Greater representation of urban Aboriginal artists in public institutions is another way in which the artform would find greater public acceptance and raise its profile in the market. It is well-recognised that:

> [T]raditional art’ from remote northern Australia tends to fetch more prizes and higher sale prices, and is more avidly collected by established art museums, than the Aboriginal art of the south (Jopson 2003: 4).
Fred Myers expresses very well the need for recognition by such institutions in the critical and economic success of art:

*It is well understood that recognition by cultural authorities – whether state galleries or significant private collections – legitimates that value of objects and informs others that such objects are distinctive and worthy of preservation. For producers, such placement of their work is critical to success, a demonstration of value to other consumers. Thus artists’ biographies always include their exhibitions and collection history as evidence of their value* (Myers 2002: 199).

What role will urban Aboriginal art play in the future of the Indigenous art market? Will urban Aboriginal art become more centrally included in dialogue about Aboriginal art rather than an afterthought or omission? Bridging the gap between traditional Aboriginal art and urban art, and indeed the audience, while still articulating important distinctions, will certainly maximise the chances of this. Instead of being hidden away for fear of it shattering the stereotyped illusion of the remote native, urban Aboriginal art should be showcased as one of the most intriguing and innovative streams of contemporary Australian art, with the ability to give insight into the complexity and richness of Australian society. Perhaps once those involved in the management of Aboriginal art embrace the rich diversity within a constantly evolving Aboriginal culture, they may lessen their reliance on primitivism to satisfy audiences.

References


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