

Finding a Voice and a Place in the Contemporary Indigenous Art World

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Abstract

This paper arises from my research on the fine art market for visual artworks by community-based artists and Cairns-based artists in Far North Queensland, and on the role of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF). While there is a vast body of knowledge and research on Australian Indigenous art there has been limited research into the Indigenous art of Far North Queensland, particularly that of 'fine art'. My research is an examination of how the participants' intercultural relationships can affect their collaboration and interdependency with other players in the art network. Taking a case-study approach, or what might be termed micro-ethnography, my research has involved interviewing artists, arts coordinators, commercial and public gallerists and buyers. I have examined the role of intercultural exchange in these relationships. In this article, I concentrate on a few questions that relate to aspects of intercultural exchange from the points-of-view of the artists, with a few additional comments from art coordinators.

My interviews were conducted at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, August 2010 with seven Indigenous community-based artists in Far North Queensland and two Cairns-based artists. While I have maintained their anonymity in this article, I am very grateful to the artists who participated in my research and thank them for their insightful comments.

In the first section of this article, a brief overview will be presented of the recent emergence of Indigenous fine art in Far North Queensland, and of the role of CIAF, and how it enables a collective voice in what can be described as an emerging regional art formation in Far North Queensland. This represents a transformation that has taken place since state and federal funding began in community art centres in the 1990s, resulting from processes combining Indigenous culture and Western commerce. My research assumes that at each stage in the trajectory of an artwork from production to consumption, the artists, arts coordinators, gallerists and buyers all participate in processes that can be described as intercultural exchange, which is generated in the interactions around the production and exchange of the artworks, and that these processes create forces of *habitus* for all parties. In my study I have used Pierre Bourdieu's social theory to help me present findings and analyse responses from participants specifically in regard to their individual *habitus*. I relay some comments from my interviews with community-based artists and Cairns-based artists concerning their views of the fine art industry, and of the relationships entailed in bringing artworks to an art market. Before I set-out the specific questions and a discussion of the responses I will give some

background to the emerging regional art industry in Far North Queensland and the situation of the artists involved.

Post-Papunya Tula: Indigenous Art in Far North Queensland

There is now a conventional history of the emergence of Indigenous fine art in Australia. In 1971, at the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya, Central Australia, art teacher Geoffrey Bardon encouraged Aboriginal residents to paint their Dreaming designs. From this simple beginning Indigenous art flourished and has become part of Australia's (national) cultural identity. The art of Far North Queensland did not develop in the same timeframe nor has the art of any one community had the same international impact that Papunya art had on the domestic and international art market in the 1970s. The production, distribution and consumption of art from Far North Queensland had its beginnings in the mid 1990s with ad hoc state government funds through its department, Arts Queensland, topped up with some federal funding. Prior to this time, only a few individual artists from the region had made their name in the Western fine art world.

In 1995, in Lockhart River, Fran and Geoff Barker, one a former teacher, the other with experience in design and manufacturing, set up an art programme for school leavers. Three girls in their teens, Samantha Hobson, Rosella Namok and Fiona Omeenyo were among the first to learn printmaking with them. In 1997, the Barkers and the artists took their prints to an exhibition in Canberra, where prominent curators Betty Churcher and Margo Neale, bought some artworks for the National Gallery of Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery. This was the start of what became known as the Lockhart River Art Gang (McCulloch-Uehlin, 2001). From the success of Lockhart River's artists the idea of upgrading the art to reach the category of fine art spread to other communities and regional centres across Far North Queensland.

In 2003, The Queensland Government under the Premier Peter Beattie recognised the potential for an export-oriented Indigenous arts industry and established the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA), as a specialist arm of Trade Queensland (QIAMEA, 2010: 7). In 2004, the *Visual Arts and Craft Strategy* (VACS) 2004-2007 received both federal and state funds to cater for visual arts and crafts in a few community centres. In 2005, UMI Arts (creole for You and Me), a subsidiary of Arts Queensland, Cairns opened its doors to assist artists with funds for exhibitions and for attending industry awareness courses. In 2006, the Queensland State Government's funding was extended to fifteen community art centres in the fiscal year of 2006-07 (The Community Futures Taskforce Report, 2007).

In 2007, the Queensland Government under Premier Anna Bligh began to contribute to community art centres through its *Backing Indigenous Art* funding programmes, which allowed for new buildings, equipment and arts coordinators with arts expertise to work in community art centres (Arts Queensland, 2009). The arts coordinators were able to network the art to be noticed by a wider audience through major art galleries. I am arguing that this has generated international recognition for several community art centres, and in the process has assisted them to get good representation as well as an

income stream. Through government funding art centres became the most reliable, secure and ethical source for acquiring art made in Indigenous communities. For example, Aurukun is famous for its woodcarvings of dogs (known as camp dogs) and lately bronzes made in its foundry. Mornington Island has several artists that portray landscapes of their country as if looking from an aircraft, but painted in a modernist style. Many of the Lockhart River artists paint in an abstract expressionist style, telling stories of current issues and life in the community, such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

Both the Cairns-based artists and community-based artists come together for the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) as part of the development of contemporary art in the region. It has operated for three years since 2009, and is a three-day annual event. Although it is a commercial venture that relies on the sale of artworks, the state government and private sponsors contribute funds and support. By concentrating on a local site all the art can be housed in one place resulting in a hub that can draw interest from arts communities and independent artists across Far North Queensland, while seeking out potential buyers from across the globe. Visitors can purchase artworks by the new wave of painters, sculptors, ceramicists and weavers. It gives exhibition space to community-based artists and Cairns-based artists, enabling the creation of a collective voice that could be identified as that of Far North Queensland Indigenous art. The artists can voice their stories of cultural and current issues, dispossession, their place in the world and their identity through their art. CIAF facilitates the building of relationships between artists and a potential buying public through direct interactions at workshops, forums and special events where potential buyers can learn from artists, listen to debates on the key issues affecting them and the Indigenous art industry.

***Habitus* and the Art Network**

The development of Indigenous art in the region has not happened in a vacuum. It has taken many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to see that the artists find a place and a voice during their careers. I have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* to help understand these processes through an examination of the dialogue that occurs between the players at the various stages of the artwork's trajectory, especially in the context of an intercultural space such as CIAF. *Habitus* is defined as a kind of interplay between free will and structure where dispositions influence individuals to become who they are, and yet also include the conditions of existence that affect individual everyday activities (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Dispositions include habits, beliefs, values, tastes, bodily postures, feelings, and thoughts that Bourdieu argued were socially produced (Johnson, 2006: 2). In this sense *habitus* is created and reproduced unconsciously, "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence, without any conscious concentration" (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Bourdieu is referring to the human capability to switch from an unconscious/automatic to a conscious/deliberate thought mode. We do not think about every small step in our everyday routine tasks but we do make conscious decisions based on a multiplicity of complex situation circumstances.

While *habitus* reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the genesis for new creative responses that transcend those social conditions. The concept that is referred to here is agency. Webb et al defined agency as, “the idea that individuals are equipped with the ability to understand and control their own actions, regardless of the circumstances of their lives” (2002: ix). In Bourdieu’s words, it is knowledge of the ‘rules of the game’ or ‘how the game is played’ that creates strategies for an agent to ‘play the game’ and/or take advantage of the opportunities that come along. For Indigenous artists and arts coordinators there are challenges to ‘playing the game’, because the art production and consumption must be limited to the structuring mechanism of the art industry and its parameters (the rules of the game).

Talking with Artists: Questions of Identity and Agency

In this section, I present a selection of the questions I asked of artists and thereafter the responses are discussed. The questions were formulated in advance of my fieldwork. My intention was to create triggers for open-ended conversations and also to create a relatively small group of questions that could be directed to all the groups in my study – artists, arts coordinators, gallerists and buyers – to enable comparison of the responses from each group as well as to qualitatively evaluate the individual responses. The first question (below) also pertains to a current intense debate regarding whether Indigenous art is a non-Indigenous business. This debate has been in newspapers, journals and the media due mainly to the comments of Richard Bell (Caruana, 2003: 18). Richard is a Queensland Indigenous artist and founding member of proppaNOW, Brisbane and appears to have taken on the role of ‘enfant terrible’ of contemporary Indigenous Australian art. He is a protest artist and a political activist. In 2003, he won the *Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award* with a painting emblazoned with the words, ‘Aboriginal Art/It’s a White Thing’. One of his later artworks had the slogan ‘I am Not a Noble Savage’. In *Bell’s Theorem*, the manifesto, which underpins his work, he highlights some of the long-standing inequities in the Indigenous art market (Caruana, 2003: 18). Bell notes that while Indigenous people produce the artworks, it is non-Indigenous people who define and control the market. In a later statement he adds, “White people say what’s good. White people say what’s bad. White people buy it. White people sell it” (Jopson, 2003). He has campaigned for land rights in particular for urban Indigenous people, for political and legislative texts in history to be revised, and about the role of the Western art industry’s involvement in Indigenous art. With this in mind I asked the artists for their opinion on this matter.

Question 1: Is Indigenous Art Essentially a Non-Indigenous Business?

The responses by the artists I interviewed acknowledged that it is a non-Indigenous business, but at no time did they mention Richard Bell. However, they did make several comments. One community-based artist, said:

The commercial end of the business in the galleries is mostly non-Indigenous and they are respectful of artists. There are guidelines set out by the government departments to ensure that a code of conduct applies for everyone that works in

art. It applies just as much to the artists as to others. If I want to be taken seriously I have to present myself properly. There are avenues that we can go to if we have a complaint about a situation or a person. That has not happened to me, I have been treated very well by gallery people.

Another community-based artist, said: “I am more concerned with selling my artworks than who is selling them”. This comment was reiterated several times throughout the interview process, which indicated that the community-based artists were fully aware of their responsibility to fulfil their obligations to bring artworks to an art market but were not concerned with the commercial end of the business being mainly owned and managed by non-Indigenous people. However, two community-based artists said they are not given any opportunities (training) to make art their business. This represents a starting-point of self-belief for community-based artists to want to be involved in the commercial end of the art network. It is about agency and wanting to make decisions to suit them as artists and not someone else. One Cairns-based artist said:

Yes, but not wholly, Indigenous people are playing a bigger role in the distribution of art and want to have control of the work. It is about empowerment for Indigenous people because getting that control back will be a way of making sure that they get a fair share of the profits.

Another comment from a Cairns-based artist: “It is a slow process. Art workers should be able to learn more and go to the next step, but this will not happen anytime soon”. The division here between these two groups of artists is that the Cairns-based artists have more opportunity for ‘social conditioning’ due to higher education and more socialisation on a multi-cultural level than do artists in communities. However, if these two groups of artists can unite on this issue Far North Queensland Indigenous artists will be more empowered to participate in the commercial end of the art market.

Question 2: Do Artists Produce What They Want?

All the community-based and Cairns-based artists said that they produce what they want and all try new styles and concepts. They also mentioned that they are mindful of their obligations to commercial galleries to produce art, which is saleable (the rules of the game). One community-based artist commented, “After all this is not ceremonial art, this is artwork to sell commercially”. Another community-based artist, commented that the “door was always open” to speak to the arts coordinator.

I found that the community-based artists were very aware of what the galleries expect from them in terms of quality and the style of artwork. The artists depend on arts coordinators to find galleries for exhibitions and other avenues to sell their art and keep the administration in the art centres ‘ticking over’ and also create harmonious workplaces. One community-based artist commented: “I don’t want to be on the ‘phone calling suppliers, framers and galleries negotiating deals and delivery dates. I have too

much to do”. At the same time arts coordinators depend on the artists to produce consistent high-quality artworks. One Cairns-based artist, commented:

Funds for art centres are very restricted and the courses are usually very far away. I go to art centres in communities (Yarrabah, Girringun, Lockhart River, Pormpuraaw) as an experienced artist to show new ideas, new concepts and new materials to explore the boundaries of art through workshops.

At no time did I find tension or disagreement between the artists and the arts coordinators, instead there seemed to be collaborative respect for each other’s skills, knowledge and expertise. They talked as if they were all colleagues in a work place.

Question 3: What Are the Obstacles Inhibiting Artworks Reaching the Art Market?

In this section there were several obstacles mentioned as specific to the individual communities only. In the informal conversations with artists and arts coordinators I found these individually situated obstacles were by no means confined to a particular community but instead were obstacles that relate to many communities. It was as if the community artists never get together to discuss and compare their issues. Except for guest facilitator artists to communities, and individual trips to Cairns or exhibitions further a field, CIAF is the only time that artists meet and discuss art.

However there were three underlying themes mentioned by two or more of the artists for each of the questions. The first theme mentioned was by the community-based artists:

The geographic distance to galleries in major cities such as Sydney and Melbourne makes communication and shipping of artworks more difficult.

The issues of distance, access to technology and the travel costs associated with sending people and freighting artworks means that the community-based artists are at a disadvantage. There are also unmade roads and complex weather patterns that maroon communities for months on end and are a reality of everyday life in the region. Both community and Cairns-based artists made the second comment:

The payment system to artists is very slow by some galleries and CIAF.

This comment was made repeatedly by both groups of artists. Both groups of artists said it takes months before remuneration is a reality. A Cairns-based artist said: “Galleries can be bad at paying”. One community arts coordinator commented that the artists stop working when they do not get paid, and this could be months, and only start again when payments are made. The final comment came from both groups of artists:

Agreeing on a base price for an artwork can be difficult.

With the community-based artists it is a question of agreement with the arts coordinator. For established artists who have experienced this many times it is not a problem, but for

emerging artists that may be exhibiting for the first time the arts coordinator will need to explain how a reputation dictates the price structure. The Cairns-based artists negotiate the price of an artwork/s directly with the gallerist. One Cairns-based artist said: “Underpayment is very common, whereby the gallery takes out more commission than it should”.

Question 4: Have You Been Exploited By Anyone In The Art Market?

Issues of exploitation are of concern and this is evidenced by the fact that there is now an industry Code of Conduct to encourage increased professionalism in relationships between artists, art centres and the market (Indigenous Art Code, 2011: 1-2). The Code states, “It is a significant step towards securing ethical trade in the industry. It establishes a set of industry standards, provides a benchmark for ethical behaviour and gives consumers greater certainty that the artworks they buy came through ethical processes” (Indigenous Art Code, 2011: 1). However, the Code only applies to galleries, art centres and individual dealers that have signed-up to the ‘Code’. This document includes standard clauses for use in contracts between art centres and artists and to inform artists about their moral and intellectual rights and to encourage sharing of knowledge.

Another example of exploitation that was discussed with an arts coordinator is ‘demand sharing’ (humbugging). Artists are reluctant to talk about this. Demand sharing is a cultural and economic system whereby a family member demands food, resources or knowledge from another family member. However, it is not a form of exchange and one does not give back equal value as one has received. For example, when an artwork is sold and the money is available to be collected by the artist, a family member/s can demand the money, a part of the money or a gift in lieu (washing machine, car and so on). This has an economic impact on the artist’s earning capacity because they have to pay their bills like everyone else. As a result of this practice the artist may end-up with no funds from the sale of an artwork.

Question 5: Explain Your Relationship With Gallery Staff – What Dialogue Takes Place?

There was a consensus that professional working relationships occur with gallery people because all the players involved need each other to make the artworks travel along the commodity chain to eventually be sold. This demonstrates that intercultural exchange through constant dialogue creates harmony to make decisions that suit all the players. One of the community-based artists commented that, “They care about my welfare; they are very courteous and take due care of me”. All commented that the artists’ presence at exhibitions helps sell art. The importance of making sales is ever present. Several of the community-based artists commented that, “Gallery people are knowledgeable and experienced at the commercial end of the art market”, qualities that community-based artists lack and therefore value the expertise of gallery staff. The Cairns-based artists are more informed and knowledgeable about the art network because they engage directly with galleries and are responsible for managing their own business as a sole trader. Their intercultural exchange with gallerists is paramount because trust must go both ways to

see that art is produced and delivered on time, at the highest quality and sold ethically with monies returned promptly.

Question 6: Do You Identify Yourself as ‘Indigenous Artist’ or ‘Artist’?

This question brought a mixed response. From the total of nine artists, three said they wanted to be known as ‘artist’, one person said ‘Aboriginal artist’, three said ‘Indigenous artist’ and two said both. The two Cairns-based artists chose to be in the category of ‘artist’. Perhaps this represents their rejection of the ethno-classification imposed on them by the Western art institutions because they live in circumstances in which they are largely alienated from ancestral country, language, ritual and symbolism. Further research and conversation with other urban artists would be required, as individual situations would differ. For one community-based artist the choice of being known as ‘artist’ is more telling of how far his/her confidence and ability has progressed in light of historical events that excluded Indigenous people from much of mainstream society. This is agency at work because the artists are making decision to suit them rather than being categorised by art ‘experts’. In the words of Bourdieu this is a conscious decision. For an Indigenous artist to compete in the mainstream art world, without the ‘label’ of Indigenous or Aboriginal is brave because it is the cultural content bound up with identity and antiquity than is the selling point.

Conclusion: The Future of Indigenous Art in Far North Queensland

The establishment of art from the community of Papunya, Central Australia in the 1970s has led to other regions of Australia adopting arts policies as a way of creating an industry that one-day will be self-sustaining. Far North Queensland may be a newcomer to this industry, but it is now a contender due in part to the Queensland State Government’s policy to fund community art centres.

My findings revealed the following. In question one, I asked if Indigenous art is essentially a non-Indigenous business. Although there was a broad consensus among the artists that it is a non-Indigenous business there was a division between community and Cairns-based artists’ comments. The community-based artists seemed more concerned with selling their art than who was selling it. While the Cairns-based artists wanted more control of the industry, although they acknowledge it is a slow process. In question two, I asked if artists produce what they want. The answer was yes, but the artists said that they are always mindful of their obligations to commercial galleries to ensure that the art is saleable. In question three, I asked about the obstacles that inhibit artworks reaching the art market. The most prominent obstacles mentioned were the distance to major galleries, slow payments by galleries and CIAF and agreeing on a base price for an artwork. In question four, I asked whether artists were exploited. Exploitation of Indigenous artists is a recognised problem that has been dealt with by the introduction of a national ‘Code of Conduct’ document that will go some way to highlight and resolve conflict issues. Community-based artists have the safety net of the arts coordinator to act as a type of ‘buffer’ against potential exploiters. While, the Cairns-based artists do not. Question five concerned the dialogue that takes place in the relationships between artists and gallery

staff. There was a consensus that professional working relationships occur with gallery staff because all the players involved need each to bring artworks to an art market. In the final question, I asked if the artists identified as “Indigenous artist” or ‘artist’. This brought a mixed response revealing that the artists get to decide how they wish to be defined in the global art market.

From my limited observations the community-based artists navigate through two separate life-worlds, one Indigenous and the other non-Indigenous. The two life-worlds are experienced separately with each one having its own merits. On one hand, there is the Indigenous world of habits, traditions, ceremonies and respect for elders, while on the other hand there is the Western world of higher education, employment and in this case an art network that is mainly comprised of non-Indigenous people. To work under the structure of the art centre there must be social order, recognition of certain standards of neatness, time deployment, punctuality, and responsiveness to the art network. The art making process allows artists to straddle both worlds by using their cultural knowledge as a separate entity and yet meshing it with Western art skills and government funded art centres to bring artworks to an art market. For the Cairns-based artists they do not live a traditional lifestyle in the same way as the community-based artists. These are artists who may be second, third or fourth generation city dwellers. Although informed by their Aboriginal heritage and background these artists are very much part of modern Australia.

Another noticeable division between the two groups is that the Cairns-based artists have shown a higher degree of pro-activism in regard to wanting change in arts policies and funding. One Cairns-based artist mentioned that if Indigenous people were ‘in control’ of the process it would be a fairer system. However to say that it will be a fairer system is a debate for the future. According to one arts coordinator, “No one has asked the artists what they want”. So if the Cairns-based educated artists acknowledge that change is slow, it follows that the community-based artists who may not have access to computers, telephones and higher education are less likely to be involved in changes to develop new arts policies. Although there were a few comments from community-based artists to indicate that there is dissatisfaction in the current system.

The role of intercultural exchange between Indigenous artists and others in the art network has been revealed to be the key ingredient to foster relationships to bring artworks from production through distribution to consumption. The outcome of these relationships is the continuity of high-standard artworks, collaboration for exhibitions between artists, arts coordinators and gallerists and lastly, interdependency between all the parties is necessary because they need each other to bring artworks to an art market. The importance of face-to-face interactions, training and expert advice cannot be underestimated. Overall the comments from artists and others have been positive displaying confidence in an emerging industry and in their individual futures.

Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* enables analysis of how artists are reformulating their artworks and themselves in accordance with past-learned knowledge and experience and adding to their information base new beliefs and confidence that transcend any prior social conditioning. What I have learned through my research is that art is a great

mediator that brings people together for exchange and collaboration across lines of difference and in the process it allows the players to find agency and as a result a voice and a place in the art world.

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