The Contemporary Dreamtime

AUSTRALIA’S INDIGENOUS ART HAS HAD AN EMBLEMATIC PLACE IN ITS MUSEUMS AND TOURIST SPOTS. BUT, WITH ITS GROWING PRESENCE IN GALLERIES, THE ART WORLD NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND IT MORE DEEPLY TO GIVE IT THE RECOGNITION IT DESERVES.

Text: Remo Notarianni
To some, indigenous art offers a break from the bustle of contemporary aesthetics with images that endearingly connect with ancient heritage and ‘the land’. Australian Aboriginal art has continued to enjoy serious study and appreciation, and it has a worldwide appeal that mysteriously resonates across cultures.

“The fascination with this art comes from the fact that it is probably still the rawest and un-spoilt art form on the planet which has gained a significant level of international acclaim,” says Giorgio Pilla, owner of Singapore-based ReDot Fine Art gallery. “One has to always remember that Aboriginal art on the whole is an art movement of a people that speak almost no English, and have almost no contact, even to this
day, with Western culture and are almost without exception untrained as artists.”

Pilla points out that most Aboriginal artists will not have attended art classes, and have no formal training, so whatever is produced is a pure expression from within, without pre-conceived notions of what should or should not or what will or will not be accepted, liked or appreciated. It is perhaps its unconditioned expressiveness that makes the art form at once fascinating and unfathomable. On one level, aboriginal art contrasts with the contemporary through its ties to ancient culture and on another it is characteristically untraditional with its emphasis on ‘unschooled’ craftsmanship that remains devoted to cultural tradition and the retelling of ancient stories.

“There is a growing understanding of Aboriginal art within the Australian market which is concerned with not only what the art is about, but also the production and the artists themselves,” says Luke Scholes, who worked formerly for the Papunya Tula as deputy manager. “Markets beyond Australia are developing their knowledge but there is a way to go. Primarily people outside Australia need to understand that whilst the art of Aboriginal Australia is based on a cultural tradition, it can and should be admired as contemporary art.”

The modern emergence of Aboriginal art can be traced back to the pioneering Papunya Tula art movement in the early 1970s—a collective of Aboriginal artists who rediscovered body and sand ceremonial art in Papunya, 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. They are widely acknowledged to have given birth to the Modern Aboriginal Art Movement. With policies of reconciliation during the 1970s and 1980s towards the ‘Stolen Generation’, the art became part of cultural bridge building with political associations that may have kept it firmly within the category of indigenous art.

“It is true that Aboriginal art has its roots in anthropology, history and the culture,” explains Pilla. “It requires a deep desire of reading and exploration to truly get to understand what lies behind this ancient culture and how the paint-
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Marlak-Ngat (The bush nearby), Lindsay HARRIS
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ings we exhibit act as a piece of the jigsaw puzzle to assist Aboriginal people in keeping their culture alive and active despite the radical changes to their nomadic mode of living which was prevalent until the early 1960-70s.” To make a leap of understanding, gallerists are faced with the task of taking consumers beyond a ‘decorative’ appreciation of Aboriginal art and according to Pilla, this teaching process is a step by step phenomena, requiring more press, more shows, and better curated exhibitions that will assist slowly but surely in “making sure that consumers better versed in the art form and what it means beyond just being a piece of, hopefully, pretty art.”

Words such as ‘indigenous’ conjure up preservation more than transformation in the context of modern Australia, and with the urgency to keep heritage intact and protect an entire culture, political associations are likely to have shaped perceptions about Aboriginal art. For the past 40 years, most of the production has focused on desert art and art coming from the interior of the country or from other communities which were largely isolated from the rest of Australian culture. But whether they remain boxed by categories or not, Aboriginal artists are not only producing new interpretations of their cultural tradition but also reflecting the world they interact with and a new kind of urban art is being created.

Artists like Tracy Moffatt, Ian Abdulla, Shane Pickett, and Lindsay Harris have opened up a new genre of Aboriginal art, which blends old with new, past with present. But whereas the visual material may be there, the challenge is for the art world to create new categories for contemporary talent in an indigenous tradition. Nevertheless, the stories will continue to be told.

“It is all about perception,” says Scholes. “Artists from different cultures all over the world base their practice on traditions that occasionally aren’t even their own. Artists borrow from art traditions, religions and cultures as it suits them and attempt to forge a contemporary aesthetic that is difficult to categorise any further than simply being contemporary. Aboriginal artists are increasingly experimenting with new styles and techniques to depict ancient stories. As many Aboriginal artists have said, it’s not about the look. It’s the story that is important.”