



## Canberra push on indigenous art carpetbaggers

By **STEVE DOW**

THEY'RE the "carpetbaggers", commercial gallery owners, backyard dealers and private agents who swoop into Aboriginal communities and snap up indigenous art at a fraction of its value, reselling the work in galleries, on the internet and eBay at inflated prices.

A Senate inquiry report into Australia's indigenous visual arts and craft sector yesterday recommended increased funding for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to monitor the industry and to conduct educational programs for the community on buying indigenous art ethically to cut out the carpetbagger, who often takes advantage of Aboriginal poverty in remote settlements.

The report of the inquiry, chaired by West Australian Liberal senator Alan Eggleston, also recommended that an indigenous art industry code of conduct be established as soon as possible. The committee recommended the indigenous arts industry be given two years to self-regulate or face a prescribed code of conduct under the Trade Practices Act.

It also recommended a new \$25 million infrastructure fund be established to assist indigenous visual arts and craft, and that a new arts centre be built in Alice Springs, given the particular problems facing indigenous artists there. As an example of a common occurrence, the inquiry heard of one dealer who paid an Aboriginal artist \$150 for a work that took a week to paint and was probably worth 10 times as much. When confronted, the dealer justified his actions by saying the Aboriginal artist would have otherwise had no income at all.

In a separate case, Anthony Oliver, chief executive of Western Australia's Jirrawun Arts, told the

inquiry of another artist's plight: "He might just need that extra \$1000 because of a family funeral... Suddenly there is a funeral: 'I need two grand.' So what happens? The unscrupulous carpetbagger will say, 'You poor fella — that Jirrawun is not looking after you, is he? You come, I'll give you \$2000', getting a \$12,000 painting or a \$30,000 painting."

The inquiry report also recommends revised legislation be introduced to strengthen indigenous communal moral rights over art works. The earlier 2002 Myer Report on contemporary visual arts and crafts in Australia had found existing moral rights legislation provided inadequate protection given the social, economic and community responsibilities of artists under indigenous customary law.

The Federal Government has already proposed legislation strengthening communal rights in Parliament's winter sitting.

Respected dealers and curators of Aboriginal art yesterday welcomed the new measures, although there was disappointment that a majority of the inquiry committee "reluctantly" concluded there would be no benefit to pursuing resale royalties. The committee found the benefits that would flow to indigenous artists — between \$1000 and \$5000 per work — would not be enough to justify administration of such a scheme.

Melbourne art dealer William Mora said yesterday that "morally" resale rights is "something that one has to support, but the practical implementation seems to be the problem".

As for warding off carpetbaggers, "if there wasn't a demand for the work by collectors, then the carpetbaggers wouldn't exist," Mora says. "It's a matter of educating the public to go through the arts centre community system."

Mora suggests buyers ask

dealers how much is paid to the artist, and go through galleries that belong to the Australian Commercial Galleries Association, which already has a code of conduct on the ethical representation of living artists, or indigenous arts centres recognised by the likes of the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists and desArt, the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres.

He welcomed the increased arts centre funding of indigenous arts centres. "If an artist is being well looked after by their arts centre community they're not going to be tempted to paint for other people," he says.

Hilary Furlong, the guest curator of the Skin to Skin cross-cultural art program being staged in Canberra's Tuggeranong Arts Centre for NAIDOC week from next Thursday and a former co-ordinator of Ernabella Arts Inc in South Australia, said yesterday the inquiry report seemed to pay appropriate and necessary attention to putting a stop to the "damaging activities of certain operators in the field, who have been causing financial nightmares".

Aboriginal artists have been drawn into the carpetbagging "web", forced to make "very inferior work" or get "ripped off" for quality work.

Furlong says that while she needs to look at the detail of the committee's reasons, she is disappointed no resale royalty scheme was recommended.

"This commodification of the work is not doing anybody any good."

The federal Arts Minister, Senator George Brandis, welcomed the inquiry report yesterday and announced that he would be visiting indigenous arts and craft groups in remote Western Australia and the Northern Territory in the coming weeks to discuss the issues.



Age  
Friday 22/6/2007  
Page: 15  
Section: Metro  
Region: Melbourne Circulation: 202,500  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 342.34 sq.cms.  
Published: MTWTFSS-

Brief: DPLAUTO  
Page 2 of 2



Education of public needed: Melbourne art dealer William Mora