

COVER STORY

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Forced to rethink about marketing Aboriginal art

Pilbara art's rocky road

A red dirt track shadows the road. The trucks and four-wheel-drives of industry are on the bitumen and the unlicensed bombs of the Aboriginal community are on the tracks – parallel but way apart.

This is the Pilbara. A place of two worlds, where the extreme prosperity of one of the biggest mining booms in Australian history and almost Third World poverty among sections of the Aboriginal population exist side by side.

The region has been on the world stage for years, struggling to keep the Asian economies fed with iron ore and North-West Shelf gas, and dragging the Australian economy along with it. But there are some who want the region known for more than its mines. They want Pilbara Aboriginal art charted on the map created by the Papunya Tula artists of the Central and Western Desert and the likes of the Warmun and Mangkaja art groups in the Kimberley.

It's about recognising and supporting indigenous culture, it's about carving off a slice of the \$100 million Aboriginal art pie for communities that have been mostly left behind by the region's unprecedented prosperity and it's about establishing a sustainable meeting point for the "black" and "white" Australians who are still

painfully far apart.

The intentions are admirable. But the Aboriginal art trade is a complex business and the dance between benevolence and exploitation and between artistic value and anthropological curiosity can be more a tangle than a tango and even the simplest acts are bound in the politics of race, disparity and mistrust.

It's a trade that has come under the microscope as allegations of rampant fraud and dodgy dealers in the Kimberley have emerged after an investigation by Perth-based fraud squad detectives.

After two frustrating years wading through the ambiguity and complications of the trade, the case was passed over to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in May last year. That investigation was dropped in March after hitting the same brick walls as the fraud squad.

It's an area so beset by cross-cultural complications and ethical ambiguities that the National Association for the Visual Arts, with funding from the Australia Council, began the process of spelling out a code of conduct for the trade to act as a kind of ethical road map in February.

But for the maze of questions about authenticity, relationships between dealers, artists and their art groups, Aboriginal visual art is widely considered a rare and striking success

story in the indigenous affairs landscape of the past 30 years.

And in February, Pilbara art laid claim to a role in that story in spectacular fashion. Eight artists from Roebourne, Karratha and Tom Price left the red dirt and flies of their country to exhibit work in the Palagio de parte Guelfa, a pre-Medici palace in the heart of the renaissance city of Florence, in northern Italy.

It was a grand endeavour. The first time a Pilbara art exhibition had left Australian shores. An important step, perhaps, in introducing the art of the region to the world.

It came at the invitation of Florentine Minister for Culture Eugenio Giani; was underwritten by the Shire of Roebourne; funded to the tune of \$210,000 by Rio Tinto's Pilbara Iron the North-West Shelf Joint Venture partners and the State Government through the Pilbara Development Commission; and organised by former Sydneysider Susan Shirliff. Eight artists made the trip, including elders from the four main Pilbara language groups. The exhibition was part of the city's annual multicultural festival and the elders signed a pact of brotherhood with the municipality of Florence on behalf of the Aboriginal people of the Pilbara.

When they arrived in their new blue Driza-Bone coats, Akubra hats, jeans and boots they'd been given for

the trip, their skin needed with the unfamiliar cold of a Tuscan winter. They were escorted through the city by Dr Giani. They saw Michelangelo's statue of David. They ate in Italian restaurants. They were led through a secret passage containing self-portraits of the most famous Italian artists of the past 400 years. And the gilded statues and elaborately painted walls and ceilings of the city's churches held them like the very hand of God.

But was it worth the price tag, when most of them work under bare tin roofs in temperatures often reaching 50C and live in conditions that the people of Florence would struggle to imagine? Could that money not have been better spent?

Only six of the 60 exhibited paintings sold. And depending on who you ask, there were between 40 and 150 people at the opening.

According to Shirliff, prominent figures in the Florentine art world attended and several galleries expressed interest in carrying the work. And 15 of the paintings have gone on to Milan, where Australia's consul-general and senior trade commissioner Tim Gauci will show them to the art-buying community.

For the artists, it was a watershed. Clifton Mack is a Yindjibarndi elder. The son of a respected rainmaker, he has lived most of his life "on country" and now lives in Cheeditha, a once-dry community just outside of Roebourne. Until he began painting five years ago he was a deeply shy, quiet and isolated man.

But since starting to paint at the Bujee Nhoorr Pu art group five years ago his life has changed dramatically. He mostly paints about the subterranean water cycles of the Pilbara, about his dad and about his country. He mentors kids who come to the centre as part of a juvenile justice community outreach program. He has won awards. And with the aid of an interpreter he has met a Sudanese tribeswoman in an online chat room. When he has sold enough paintings he plans to go to Africa to meet her.

In Florence this man, once shy and tentative in the "white" world, moved confidently among a crowd of strangers in a 600-year-old palace a world away from his red dirt home.

Then there is Murinba, one of the last surviving members of the Jaburara people of the Burrup Peninsula who some believe were

wiped out at the Flying Foam "massacre" in 1868. For her, art has been a saviour.

"I was the town drunk before I started painting," she says. "I used to drink every day for four days and then two days off or one day off and back on it again. Not any more."

Kathryn Njamme paints the country of her parents and promises her father on his death bed that she would paint his country and teach the stories to her children. For her the trip to Florence was a chance to expand that promise.

Was the trip a success? Was it worth the price tag?

Bujee Nhoorr Pu art co-ordinator Adam Lockhart accompanied artist Clifton Mack, Simon Hubert and Marriana. He has his doubts.

"They had a ball, it was a total freakout for them, but it was weird dropping them off at Cheeditha when we got back," he says.

"This was like a quarter of a million-dollar exercise and Clifton still has no food in his fridge and I had to lend him \$20 yesterday afternoon. You know what I mean."

Janet Brown and Monica Kotulla began Bujee Nhoorr Pu in July 200



Susan Shirliff: Director of the Pilbara Art Gallery. Picture: Sharon Smith



Artist Maudie at the Cossack studio.

with the Cheeditha Group Aboriginal Corporation. And Brown, who now works with artists in Tom Price, believes the trip was flawed in principle and risked being another case of big-ticket window dressing. Where money was spent, glossy pictures were taken for sponsors' annual reports, and once again much-needed money for Aboriginal community development would never hit the ground where it was desperately needed.

"Whether the trip itself was a success can only be judged on whether it makes any real difference to the situations of these people on the ground," she says.

"What is the point of funding a one-off that will not directly filter back and benefit the wider indigenous community? It can have a positive effect but there has to be some sustainable outcome from this. I mean, for God's sake, we have been trying to get a kitchen out at Bujee for four years at a cost of \$22,000 which would have benefited the health and wellbeing of the people over the long term."

For Brown there is also a question of recognition. Many of the works taken to Florence were painted at Bujee, where the artists work as part of the Roebourne Community Development Employment Program. The artists' time, the paints and canvases are paid for through the CDEP. And yet neither Bujee, nor the CDEP, were recognised in the exhibition catalogue as contributing to the event and they received no money from the sales.

"This trip has taken from Bujee and given nothing back," Brown says.

"Really some of that money should be going back to sustaining this incubator from which you will get leaders, you will get the training, you will get the group of people who will grow step by step by step. You can't fast-track these things."

Bujee Nhoorr Pu opened its doors at the old Galbraith store, in the coastal ghost town of Cossack, when TAFE lecturers Brown and Kotulla began an indigenous art course with the Cheeditha community.

For the first 18 months there was no electricity and no running water. Water for washing brushes was

brought up from the Cossack wharf by bucket chain. Painting tables were doors scavenged from the dump, on top of stacked bricks. Paint and canvas was bought with money raised by hiring out the whole group, lecturers included, for gardening and labouring.

But things started to change when Brown contacted Brian Wilson, superintendent at the Roebourne Regional Prison. The pair organised for day-release prisoners to be sent to the art centre to take part in TAFE training courses. It provided extra funding and manpower for the centre and what would prove to be an extremely effective day-release program for the prison.

Recidivism rates among the day-release prisoners and young offenders sent to Bujee have plummeted. And for the artists who are bussed in from Roebourne and Cheeditha five days a week, Bujee is an oasis. It's hot and simple, but it's a place where the problems of town cannot follow them.

Then in October 2003, Susan Shirliff came on to the scene.

She'd just finished a contract as one of five project managers of the Rugby World Cup and flown into town to visit her husband, who was on a six-week contract on the North-West Shelf gas project Train 4. She hit the Aboriginal art trade in the Pilbara like a Jonah Lomu on a wing.

She was planning to fly straight back to Sydney but the search for an outback souvenir changed everything. "I started driving around the towns of Karratha and Dampier and not only could I not find any semblance of Aboriginal art craft or culture, but I couldn't find any semblance of anything Aboriginal at all," she says.

"I couldn't find any Aboriginal street names, I couldn't find a statue in the park, there was no monument at the airport. This town was only built 30 years ago and that started me thinking, this is not something you can blame another generation for. We did this. This is my generation. And I started to get quite agitated that we have built this town here and obliterated that there were any Aboriginal people here."

She drove to the Karratha Library, asked where all the Aboriginal people were and was sent — in her heels and matching resort wear — to Roebourne.

So she packed her borrowed 4WD with water, a scarf and a hat and bravely ventured into the red interior, not knowing that Roebourne was a 20-minute drive away on a sealed road.

"It was the lack of hope that you could sense in the town, which was dramatically different to Karratha and Dampier, which was full of promise and employment, that was so confrontational for me," she says.

"I had always imagined that a lot of the reasons Aboriginal people are not doing as well as the rest of us is that they live in communities that are too far away to benefit from employment and education — that was how I acquitted it in my mind. But here I was 20 minutes out of the third most wealthy town in Australia and these people die 25 years younger and it was obvious."

The search for a souvenir was over. What she was seeing from her air-conditioned cabin was a slice of a community in crisis. A community where, according to a study commissioned by Pilbara Iron last year, of the 4760 working-age Aboriginal people, 42 per cent had jobs, only 68 per cent had Year 10 schooling. Where in the 12 months before the study 22 per cent had been arrested and 60 per cent had been treated in hospital.

What was abundantly clear was that regardless of good intentions, the efforts to meet the needs of these Australians were failing. Something new had to be tried. For Shirliff it was the corporate approach.

After coming across Bujee and with the encouragement of Brown, she did a "threshold analysis" of the fledgling enterprise and devised a plan. It was pretty simple. Establish a local gallery as a point of sale and then organise domestic and international exhibitions to create a distribution network for the work.

In less than a year she'd opened Karratha's only Aboriginal art gallery, Pilbara Art. In its first year the gallery lifted sales of Bujee work by \$47,000. In early 2005 she took three artists to exhibit in Sydney and was then made the project manager of the Florence exhibition.

For her, there is no question about the success of the Florence trip. The work had been well received, sales through Italian galleries would come and, perhaps more importantly, it had raised important debates in the

Pilbara community about the way forward for the maturing arts trade.

Roebourne Shire president Dani Nazzari admits mistakes were made.

"Some of the politics were got wrong in this case," she says.

"Not recognising the enormous contribution made by groups such as CDEP, who pay the artists to paint, and also are integral in securing sponsorship monies (was one). It was an oversight on our behalf when we went into this deal, the Shire of Roebourne takes full responsibility for that."

But according to Nazzari, the broad intention of the trip was to lift the profile of art and culture in the

Pilbara and on that score it had been a huge success.

Perhaps the biggest progress has been made since the group returned. With concerns about the trip being aired in town and to this newspaper, things have begun to move.

A meeting between the Shire of Roebourne, resource company representatives and the Roebourne CDEP ended in an agreement by industry to fund a permanent marketing position in the soon-to-be co-operatised Roebourne Arts Group, which oversees Roebourne's four art centres. There are moves afoot to establish contracts between artists and their centres and to

establish a system for authenticating work and tracking their sale prices.

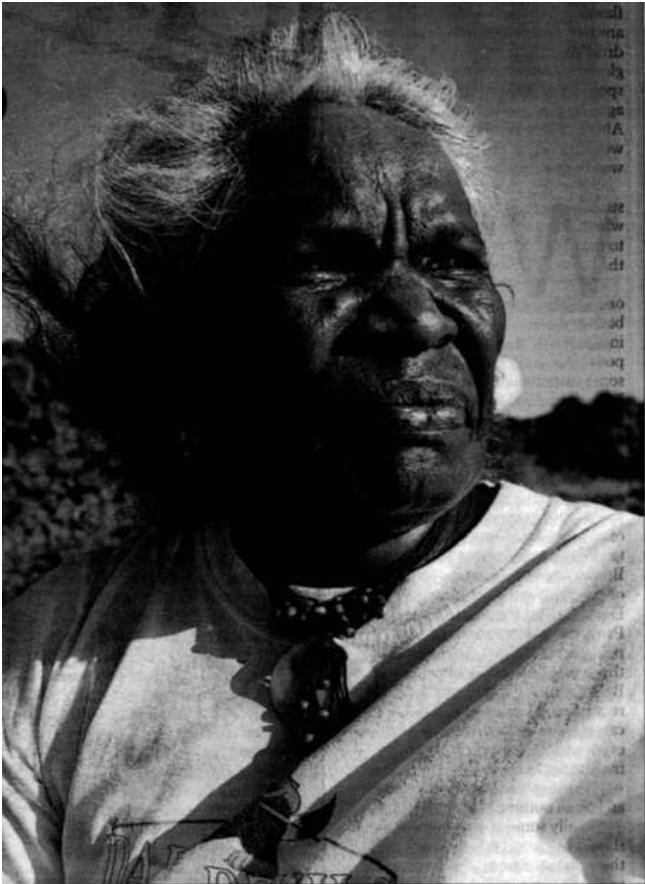
"I am seeing a lot of pride in town, since the artists got back," Shirtliff says. "Sure, everybody wants a fan over their head, but there is nothing to say that spending more money building more buildings is going to have any profound effect, because it hasn't up till now. Projects like this are about hope and self-esteem, not just about more bloody buildings."

Changes are being made on the ground. But whether the Florence trip was a success and whether Pilbara art can establish itself in the art world, only time will tell.



Artists at work: Clifton Mack, Kenny Diamond and Simon Hubert in the Cossack studio.

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Aboriginal artist Murinba on the Burrup Peninsula. She is one of the last surviving members of the Jaburara people of the Burrup Peninsula and claims art as her saviour from alcohol. Pictures: Ken Maley