

COLLECTING ABORIGINAL ART IN THE AUSTRALIAN NATION

TWO CASE STUDIES

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How Aboriginal acrylic painting came to be reframed as “high art” is an interesting ethnohistorical question. Scholars have traced the increasing frequency of the exhibition of Aboriginal Australian acrylic painting and the increasing emphasis on the framework of fine art and contemporary fine art in these exhibitions. Individual artists come prominently into attention, both in the press and also—eventually—with one-person exhibitions. In this article I delineate the collecting practices and ideologies that lie at the foundation of two of the important early collections of acrylic painting in Australia—that of Tim and Vivien Johnson (which was gifted eventually to the Art Gallery of New South Wales) and that of Dame Margaret Carnegie (some of which was gifted to the Art Gallery of Victoria). My aim is to explore the differences in their understanding of the art and its importance as part of a more concrete analysis of the forms of cultural convergence between Aboriginal culture and particular formations in the larger social world in which it came to circulate. These processes involve Australia’s distinction as a nation as well as its postcolonial emergence from British domination toward varying forms of nationalist cosmopolitanism. [Key words: Aboriginal art, collectors, circulation, national culture]

By now, it is well known that Aboriginal Australian acrylic painting has received a remarkable degree of recognition. What remains less known are the social and cultural processes through which what I have discussed elsewhere as a movement between different “regimes of value” occurred (Myers 2001, 2002; see also Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991). How is it that acrylic paintings have become available to viewers, rather than simply dispersed into an anonymous market? As objects of visual anthropology, I want to argue, acrylic paintings have properties that distinguish them from other media. They are hand-made, unique objects, produced in substantial numbers and at relatively low cost to the producers, and as such they enter into a diverse market—and in this way, they threaten to be scattered or distributed promiscuously, leaving little trace. Collectors, conversely, select and gather paintings together, offering their combinations for sustained consideration—opposing unrestrained circulation and proposing evaluative distinctions.

In this essay, I am concerned with one dimension of the reframing of Aboriginal acrylic painting

in the category of “high art” in 1980s. The growing frequency of exhibitions of Aboriginal Australian acrylic painting and the increasing emphasis on the framework of “fine art” and “contemporary fine art” in these exhibitions is well known (see Myers 2001, 2002; Perkins and Fink 2000). Importantly, in such processes, individual artists came prominently into attention, both in the press and also—eventually—with the one-person exhibitions that are the *sine qua non* of fine art recognition’s emphasis on individual artistry and singular masterpieces (see Clifford 1988:210).

In my own previous writing on this transformation, I have focused mostly on two dimensions of this emerging field of cultural production (see Myers 2001, 2002), exploring (1) the development of the “industry” of Aboriginal arts and crafts and marketing, as components of governmental policy and (2) the rise of art criticism (Myers 1994; see also Altman et al. 1989; Altman and Taylor 1990). In this article, I take up the consideration of collectors and the formations of collections that serve to legitimate

Aboriginal cultural forms as “fine art” and—what may come to be the same thing—to provide a basis for “educating the art-buying public” (Altman 1990; Taylor 1990).

I am focusing here particularly on collections from the first Central Australian Aboriginal art cooperative, Papunya Tula Artists, to delineate the collecting practices and ideologies that lie at the foundation of two important early collections of acrylic painting in Australia—that of Margaret Carnegie (some of which was sold to the National Gallery of Victoria) and that of Tim and Vivien Johnson (ten of which were sold and five donated in 1995 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales). Formed in the 1970s and 1980s, during a period in which Western Desert acrylic painting had yet to be accorded the status it ultimately has come to have as “fine art,” these two collections are usually seen as the principal Australian collection of Papunya painting in the late 1970s. While a few other important collections were created simultaneously (Richard Kelton, United States) or subsequently (Robert Holmes à Court, Australia; John Kluge, United States, and Donald Kahn, United States), I discuss Carnegie and the Johnsons for what their activities can tell us about the appeal of the paintings to collectors and also to clarify what they thought they were doing. The differences in their understanding of the art and its importance allow for a more concrete analysis of the forms of *cultural convergence* between Aboriginal culture and particular formations in the larger social world in which it came to circulate. These processes involve Australia’s distinction as a nation as well as its postcolonial emergence from British domination toward varying forms of nationalist cosmopolitanism.

My interest is in understanding the effect of collecting at a particular time, undertaken with a particular combination of motivation and taste. However reductive it might appear to connoisseurship, I am interested in what Bourdieu (1984) has called a disposition emanating from a “habitus” and of the placement of these dispositions within broader fields of cultural production.

UPPER CLASS NATIONALISM: NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Mostly I like to buy first and then make the close relationship afterwards. [Margaret Carnegie, personal communication, July 8, 1991]

Both wealthy and distinguished for many reasons in Australia, with an impressive network of acquaintances and friends in her home city of Melbourne, Margaret Carnegie blended Australian earthiness with a sense of social duty and an aristocratic, high society noblesse oblige. She and her husband, Douglas Carnegie, owned a property in rural Victoria—Kildrummie—where he bred Hereford cattle studs. As an art collector, writer, and contributor to Australian life and institutions, at the age of 81 when I interviewed her in Melbourne, Margaret Carnegie had been recognized with many national honors, including the Order of Australia (OA) and the Medal of the Order of Australia (MOA). Margaret Carnegie was part of Melbourne’s moneyed elite and its nexus of cultural patronage, and—born and married before World War Two—a generation older than the Johnsons. This placed her more inside the world of business and national pride and outside the Bohemian world of the Johnsons. As a collector, Margaret Carnegie had formed three major collections that ended up, in various ways, in major Australian museums: modern Australian art, South East Asian ceramics, and Aboriginal acrylic painting. Drawing heavily on work done in the inspired first few years of Papunya Tula, her collection of Aboriginal acrylics placed her ahead of almost any other private collector in this area. Her activities were fundamental to the 1980s boom, which drew largely on the promotion of Aboriginal art in Melbourne. As an article from the *Australian Financial Times* maintained,

The sale by Margaret Carnegie of *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* by [Tim] Leurah Tjapaltjarri to the National Gallery of Victoria for a sum speculatively reported at around \$250,000, but now believed to be about half that amount, set off a new commercial awareness of Aboriginal art among serious dealers. [Ingram and Bagwell 1989]

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Figure 1. [Tim] Leurah Tjapaltjarri, Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming.

The painting is surely a masterpiece, unusual in both its size and execution, but its sale at such a high price electrified the art market. This simply illustrates how a collector with substantial reputation—gained through the success of earlier collections—could validate much higher prices for paintings and legitimate their cultural value for museums. All of this was advanced, undoubtedly, by Carnegie's position as trustee at the National Gallery of Victoria.

At her high-rise apartment in downtown Melbourne in July 1981, she was very welcoming to me. No doubt, my standing as an "academic expert" on the Aboriginal people of Papunya was significant to this reception. The conversation was literally strewn with reference to particular people she had known, such as the former art advisers for Papunya Tula Artists. Many others she mentioned were people far beyond the social worlds in which a modest anthropologist would move: a former Prime Minister ("Bob Menzies," she called him), high society folks, as well as more rebellious cultural figures like Robert Hughes, the art critic, who "used to visit us in our house." I have never been sure if what was more than name dropping was simply the expression of her orientation as a collector to specificities and provenances, and the special memory that comes from that, or whether these references were part of a routine of establishing her authority, my authority, or our relationship through these people. There were, conversely, many details and histories that I could offer from my knowledge of Aboriginal people that Margaret could herself store in her "files."

Our conversation took place shortly after the *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality* exhibition curated by

two of her friends (Crumlin and Knight 1991) in Melbourne, in which she played a part and for which she wrote a description of herself as a "collector." Carnegie has written about her desire for collecting:

I was born acquisitive, with an insatiable curiosity. Every new acquisition led me on a journey of exploration, on a quest to discover the artist's motivation, where he or she fitted in a historical sense, and the inspiration behind the subject matter. Visually oriented, I wanted to find a work's soul, to know whether, when I moved away and closed my eyes, I could see it and feel it speaking to me. [1991:124]

Her desire, she wrote, was linked to the pursuit of knowledge, moving from objects to what lay behind them. Obviously, coming from a somewhat privileged cultural background,¹ she began collecting early:

I formed my first collection when I left school: I paid Jeffrey Schrenk, a violinist friend of my mother's, a pound or ten shillings each for about a dozen Japanese Ukiyo-e prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai and Utamaro. During the Second World War, my mother persuaded me to donate them to the Comforts Fund. [1991:124]

Collections were not simply to be hoarded for personal pleasure, but might be sacrificed to a social good in line with one's social standing. With a more critical bent, a Sydney friend explained, "This is all part of the pretenses of a small town [and its elite] to 'greater things'."

There was an effect, however, from the experience of collecting, the formation of an orientation to taste that would distinguish her from many in Australia who were often quite resistant to modern art: "Studying the Japanese prints opened my eyes to the influences they exerted on Matisse, Picasso and, indeed, the whole modern art movement" (Carnegie 1991:124). She studied overseas, as she told me in our interview, and this gave her a different perspective from that of many Australians long dominated by a British perspective but seeking a distinctive Australian sense, beyond British national history (see White 1981):

I've been sort of mucking around on the fringes of the art world for over 60 years. I was educated in Switzerland, which gave me a different viewpoint to what I'd been taught. In those days, you see, we were only taught European history and the Swiss had an entirely different idea about battles that we'd been taught the British had won. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

In the essay she wrote for the *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality* catalog (Crumlin and Knight 1991), Carnegie said she had "a stimulating White Russian art teacher in Switzerland who focused my interest on European art of the Renaissance, a month's tour of Italy, Paris, London...galleries, museums, libraries" (1991:124). And when she arrived home in Melbourne, she was able to further her cultivation through instruction by mentors from the Fine Art Gallery and a trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria—institutions considered vital to the elevation of Australian national culture. These are excellent connections, showing an older type of Australian combination of cosmopolitanism and local identity, a national elite replicating the model from Europe in her own country. What made her stand out, however, was striking in a direction ahead of others, albeit with some significant resources:

So I made an early collection...of Australian art, when I came back. I said, "These paintings are *just as good as anything I've seen overseas*." And so I collected them. And there was no competition much. So I had a wonderful time. Well then, Australians woke up to what they had, and it became very fashionable. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

The quality and scope of Carnegie's collecting of modern Australian art established her as a person of genuine acumen. Her collection of paintings (which included 460 objects, including Margaret Preston and the like, exemplars of Australian nationalism) was exhibited on October 27, 1966 at the National Gallery of Victoria (1991:124), a very unusual event for a private collection.² During the economic downturn of the period, it was the prelude, however, to selling the collection.³ Carnegie emphasizes implicitly that the collection was not a kind of economic insurance; she frames herself as someone who *achieved* collecting through curiosity and acumen rather than through simple wealth and the desire for personal display:

We were on the land, and we were always hard up. We've always been hard up. And, I've always had to be a jump ahead or else, you know. I never thought there was any money [in collecting]. *It was instead of buying a hat*. I had a small income and, you know, it was the interest [that she used to make purchases]. But, I woke up that there was money in the ordinary ones, and a Yank bought them to give to an Australian collection, Allen Christensen. He was "Utah,"⁴ and I became very involved with him, in a way. Not in the way that perhaps he would have liked; I've never liked him, I would say, enough, but on an intellectual level, so that his widow, when he died, sent me three absolutely divine things that I've got that thing on the table there. That turquoise, he always wore around his neck. He was a Mormon. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

The art connection—a part of her extraordinary network—emanated from business ties, but its evolution shows a good deal about the minimal development of the arts in Melbourne and Margaret Carnegie's placement as a builder of collections ahead of her time. While she sold most of the collection to Christensen, "The arrangement," she told me, "was anything Melbourne Gallery (the National Gallery of Victoria) wanted, they could have, and they sent someone out to choose what they'd have" (personal communication, July 8, 1991).

Carnegie's aesthetic curiosity and pursuit of the knowledge behind and embedded in things drew her into new understandings. Indeed, they propelled her

toward political positions unusual for those of her primary social world. Those raising cattle on the land have typically been a socially conservative group. Her involvement with Aboriginal art was consequential, therefore, in tracing a different political awareness for her. Carnegie wrote:

I'm convinced that Aboriginal art is the most exciting art in the world today. As for what has happened to me as a result of my involvement... I don't mind being odd woman out when I am among my old friends. They still do not understand that we need a new perspective on historical facts—Australia was neither settled nor conquered but annexed.

Once I came back to Australia and saw what we had in this country, I needed no other interest in art. This is our country, our art, our wonderful landscape, and the Aboriginal artists are my friends. I am only a custodian of their work. [1991:125]

Carnegie remained, nonetheless, what I would call a “cultural nationalist” in her patronage. Aboriginal painting was still, for her, “our art.” If she fell in love with “the beautiful desert paintings, which have their origins in the desert sand” (1991:124), their value for her lay also in their integrity and their lack of debt to influences from abroad:

I came to the conclusion that Australian Aboriginal art is the first-nonderivative Australian painting, and is the most important art being produced in the world today. It is an art which I believe will influence Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal urban artists worldwide. [1991:124]

THE NETWORK

One cannot fail to recognize the centrality for Margaret Carnegie, as a collector, of the network within which her patronage is established and its connection to her other activities of charity and trusteeship. She sat on numerous Boards, building up Australian institutions. She successfully nominated at least three different individuals involved in Aboriginal art for national honors—something she told me “was an awful lot of work.” Aboriginal art, and Carnegie's knowledge and

connections to it, mediated a broad set of relationships, building an ever-expanding network ranging from political figures and curators to the extraordinary figures working in artificial intelligence and education.

Margaret Carnegie began collecting Western Desert acrylic paintings at the earliest possible moment, and through a set of connections that are very telling. It was Robert (Bob) Edwards⁵—part of the older generation of Australian amateur intellectuals and a protégé of H.C. “Nugget” Coombs⁶—who made the connection, drawing on Carnegie's inclination to patronage and support of the public good. Then a curator at the South Australian Museum, Edwards had become a supporter of the paintings after a visit to Alice Springs and telephoned her at the end of 1971:

He'd been up to Alice Springs, and he bought the first paintings...that had been brought in by Geoff Bardon.⁷ And he rang up and said, “Margaret, I've got onto something really marvelous that I think you'd like. And I can't afford to keep them. The museum, who expected they'd get them for nothing—and I paid the Aborigines which was Geoff's idea—won't cough up.” I said “Well, sight unseen, I'll take your word for it, but you'd better put them on exhibition. I'd better not be greedy.” And he did that, and I lost two that way, one they gave to Frank Norton, who was then director of the Perth Gallery, and one a Yank⁸ bought. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

It is important to recognize the specificity of a collector's discourse, describing the love at first sight, or the “ones that got away.” Carnegie “fell in love with the beautiful desert paintings which have their origins in the desert sand” (1991:124), but the particular circumstances and the traces of the people involved with the collecting are never left out.

But I got the rest. And the moment I saw them, I realized these were divine. So I got on to Bob and said, “Why, who is this Geoff Bardon?” So he said, “He's going back, he lives right in, um...” What is that suburb of Sydney? Out of Sydney, I've got the address; I went there. And that's where he got ill...

And so, I immediately got in touch with him [Bardon]. I said, “These look absolutely interesting, I'd like some more.” So, of course, you know,

I started, and I really started and got a really decent collection. Well at one stage they had to be flogged [sold], because Doug got so short of chips on the land.⁹ There was always a crisis, you know. Ah ha! On the land, there's never any dough. So that was sad. And I still drool over one that was in this [recent] Aboriginal spiritual art [exhibition]...

To cut a long story short, it's always been my habit—if I like an artist—to get in touch with him and buy more than one or two. Which is what I did, you see, with Geoff. We've remained friends ever since. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

Although, I knew briefly many of the personages she mentioned, I was impressed with the extent to which Margaret Carnegie had significant transactions with so many people, all of them feeding into her collecting. For example, Pat Hogan had been the owner of a small art gallery in Alice Springs, and most of the early paintings from Papunya Tula passed from Geoff Bardon through her gallery. While I hoped our conversation would draw out her memories of the people as a kind of history, I found she turned directly to more pragmatic issues of her collection. What was important about Pat Hogan was that she framed so many of the early paintings of Papunya Tula, and you can tell when they were done.

Carnegie's relationship to the National Gallery of Victoria had been of long duration, and it was a very important part of her public identity. When I offhandedly remarked, "Aren't the Gallery people lucky that you're their friend?" Margaret responded quite seriously:

Well, actually *I* was lucky, because they gave me the *first* exhibition of my original paintings in the old gallery. And because I gave them a lot of material then—a lot of paintings—Rod [her son, Roderick Carnegie] said, "Mom, you've got to stop. You can't afford to go giving all of this away." But I'm a life member, one of the first life members. And so I've had a lot of, you know, happy moments and kudos from them. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

But, the real orientation of our interview was the disposition of her collection, as I realized when she showed me some of what still remained of her collection:

The only early ones [that she still had] are the few bits and pieces I held back when I had to sell so many. And I held both *these*, and I held *that* *Anatjarri* [Tjakamarra, name of one of the Pintupi painters, included in the *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality* catalog, p. 50]. These two Tim Leura's I just adore. I'll put this down [something to protect the paintings]. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

I was a little confused as I asked her if the paintings whose pictures she was showing me had gone to the Gallery (of Victoria). "No," she told me, "I *want* these to go to Canberra," and she continued:

Only they've got to pay for them. That's the trouble. Roderick [who is co-owner of the paintings] needs money now. And so he owns half, and he says, "You can't." I don't know. If they [the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra] bought some, they could have some for tax deduction. But they'd have to part up with some. Wally Caruana [then curator of Aboriginal art at the NGA] wants them because he knows they're what they need.

If they get it, you see, there's 60. This one here, that's rolled up, was cut from the same piece that the one they've got at the Victoria, referring to the famous *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming*. It's not quite as long. Here it is. I could show you a photograph, actually. I think it's in the *Dreamings* book, on the floor.

There that's the one that was in the exhibition. Nearly killed me to see it again. I just adored it. I had it hanging by a *wonderful* Fred Williams, and I'll tell you, it didn't suffer from being near the Fred Williams. *That* was mine, *that* was mine, too. *That* was mine. It broke my heart. And *that* I adore. *That* was mine, *that* was mine, *that* was mine. But I have to do something with the [collection]... So, if you see Wally, tell him I have to do something. I had a triple bypass at the beginning of the year and seeing I'm 81 that means going on for 82, and I don't want to die without them fixed up. Because I don't know what Roderick will do with them. They'll sell them overseas if they can... I want them, I want them in Canberra. They really should be in Canberra. [personal communication, July 8, 1991]

Margaret Carnegie was an impressive person, and she knew how to direct the conversation to the end she planned. In retrospect, I have realized that her story and collection presented me with a particular formation of space and time, organizing through art an Australian national culture tied to its territory and projected into its museums through a network of adherents—something like what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) famously called a “chronotope.” The collection, and the practices of collecting—of buying, showing, studying, and selling paintings and of meeting their makers, collectors, dealers and curators—extends her person, as anthropologists are prone to say, and provides a kind of agency through the proxy of these objects.¹⁰ But it is possible to say something more about the location of this agency and the particular world that it indexes and represents. If the art world for contemporary international modern art is centered on the cosmopolitan centers, Margaret Carnegie’s resources and interests should be understood as constituting a center for a different formation, an Australian national art world. Thus, because of her extensive collection of Australian modern art, the art critic Robert Hughes stayed with her family “when he was writing the first art in Australia book, the one that’s withdrawn. It’s dedicated to us” (personal communication, July 8, 1991). She found him a fascinating character, although clearly not from her usual class.

Within such an art world, the paintings are circulated and known in particular ways among specific sets of people—people who recognize each other, or learn to recognize each other as participants or players in this world, based on their varying but overlapping knowledges. Margaret Carnegie sought to accumulate the paintings that interested her, linking herself in various ways even to the makers of Aboriginal art, and to bequeath this product of her intelligence, acumen and wealth to high-ranking Australian national institutions. These sales recognize and legitimate her activities and the paintings she collected, but they also acknowledge and incorporate the paintings and the people who made them as part of Australia’s cultural patrimony. This was, as she told me, “our art.”

Nicholas Thomas notes Margaret Preston’s statement that an earlier generation of Australians had sought to draw inspiration from Aboriginal art in order to distinguish Australia from other nations, providing “a chance for Australia to have a national art” (Thomas

1999:120). Thomas and others (McLean 1998; Thomas 1978; White 1982) have described the literary nationalists and others in the 1930s and 1940s who felt that Australian culture, “had been stifled by its British inheritance and that an engagement with the Australian environment was essential if anything distinctive and vital was to emerge” (1999:133). This seems to fit the timing of Margaret Carnegie’s formation, with her collection of Preston’s paintings and her interest in Australian historical figures such as Morgan the Bushranger and Breaker Morant.¹¹

But something different was potentiated by the collection of Aboriginal acrylic paintings whose circulation recombined constituencies and forms of value in ways that Margaret Preston’s famous wildflower still-lives and Aboriginal appropriations in domestic genres did not. If Preston’s combinations failed as objectifications of a national identity, the capacity of portable and purchasable indigenous acrylic paintings to mark Australia as a significant tourist destination for travelers in the 1980s and 90s combined successfully with their ability to represent a distinctive national identity for the emerging faction of the modernizing, but postcolonial professional managerial class. Indeed, the project of Aboriginal acrylic painting itself grew out of an Australian project of modernization (“to deal with the Aboriginal problem”) that reflexively produced a new Australian national identity—as an agent of modernity and fairness in a world of such identities—whose success was reflected in the appreciation that connoisseurs like Carnegie had of “Aboriginal art” and in the distribution of value back to Aboriginal producers.

This fissure, however, offers some insight into Carnegie’s collecting. Thomas has pointed out that some of the earlier cultural nationalists, such as Preston, cannot “be dismissed for having merely seized upon indigenous reference as a short-cut to national distinctness” (1999:137). Rather, he argues, they bring to the surface the problem of cultural combination as a *formal problem*, contrasting with the logic of modernist primitivism. Thus, he maintains, “Preston’s insistent, overbearing deliberate foregrounding of the Aboriginal element” makes explicit the *fact of Aboriginal difference* (Thomas 1999:140), rather than its easy incorporation. According to her own account, as I interpret it, Carnegie was moving to this different sort of assertion, speaking directly to differentiate herself from the

dominant orientation of her generation: "It remained," she said, "for the Aboriginal people themselves to use Western materials to present the world with a 'new' art form" (Carnegie 1989). But, while recognizing their difference at one level, Carnegie does seek to contain it within the Australian umbrella. If the European settlers have clung to the rim of the continent and merely visit its heart, "The indigenous people of the Centre...are nurtured by a different landscape" (Carnegie 1989). And it is this that the paintings reveal:

The paintings are mystical, spiritual art, deriving as they do from the very land we live in and are nurtured by. They are the heritage of every Australian of whatever ethnic background or skin color. Until they are acknowledged in that way, we will lack a full understanding of their significance. [Carnegie 1989]

While her writings and lectures about the art provided some insight to her view of the potential of aboriginal art, they were not her primary contributions. She worked hard to develop this recognition for the art. She personally helped ensure that key participants in the development of Papunya Tula (Geoffrey Bardon and Daphne Williams) received national honors. Such honors are more than the recognition of individuals; they represent the recognition that their project is part of Australia's national project. Clearly, this was a system that Margaret Carnegie understood very well, and she worked within it, moving paintings and people together, introducing new people to the Aboriginal art world, helping proponents of the art—such as Bob Edwards—by buying it in the early days. Margaret Carnegie's connections—her network—were a system for producing value within a fairly traditional and conventional society. This trajectory may be distinctive of Melbourne's high society, one always in competition with the larger and more cosmopolitan society of Sydney—the pretensions, as some would say, of a small town to greater things.¹² What took place in the paintings, and what was represented by the paintings, was only mildly at odds with the dominant society. Even to this extent, her support of the paintings seems to have brought her into some conflict with her peers among Melbourne's upper crust, but it—and the network she built—distinguished Carnegie's among them.

DISTANCE REDUCED: BOHEMIAN COSMOPOLITAN NATIONALISTS

When the Johnsons arrived in the Aboriginal art scene, in the late 1970s, Papunya Tula's acrylic paintings were not selling very well. Traveling up to the Centre from the Bohemian world of Sydney, Tim—an artist of considerable reputation in Australia himself—and Vivien—a sociologist of popular cultural forms—engaged the paintings from their own historical placement in the post World War Two generation, a context most clearly represented in the development of Australian art. I draw my knowledge of these two people mainly through their writings.

Tim Johnson describes his interest as beginning with a show in Sydney in 1977 at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, run by the federal government-supported Aboriginal Arts and Crafts, Pty Ltd. (AACP), where he saw some of the "first of the big canvases."¹³ Johnson began his collecting during a trip to Alice Springs in 1978, a visit he claims was inspired by a dream. Unable to visit the remote Aboriginal community at Papunya without a permit, he bought two paintings in the arts and crafts shop in the town of Alice. Back in Sydney in 1978, he collected paintings. They were cheap at that time, and there was quite a lot of stock at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, "just stacked on top of each other in the storeroom" (1990:21). Two years later, disillusioned with life in Sydney, he returned to Alice Springs, determined to learn more about the artists. Tim Johnson described his interest in them *as painters*—that is, not simply as Aboriginals, but as people of his own type—in the following passage:

Essentially, I was interested in painting, the thing I'd been doing for years...But here it was happening in another world, another era, and the paintings were like nothing I'd ever seen. The artists' approach to materials was totally devoted, in that every bit of paint was manipulated with love and care—and with awe. The approach to materials was perfect. Paintbrushes were treated like delicate objects, paints were used with a precision and delicacy I'd never seen before. This attitude the artists had to the materials leads to a really refined level of control. [1990:22]

This was painting as a sacred act, a framework congenial to modern Western artists; the painters'

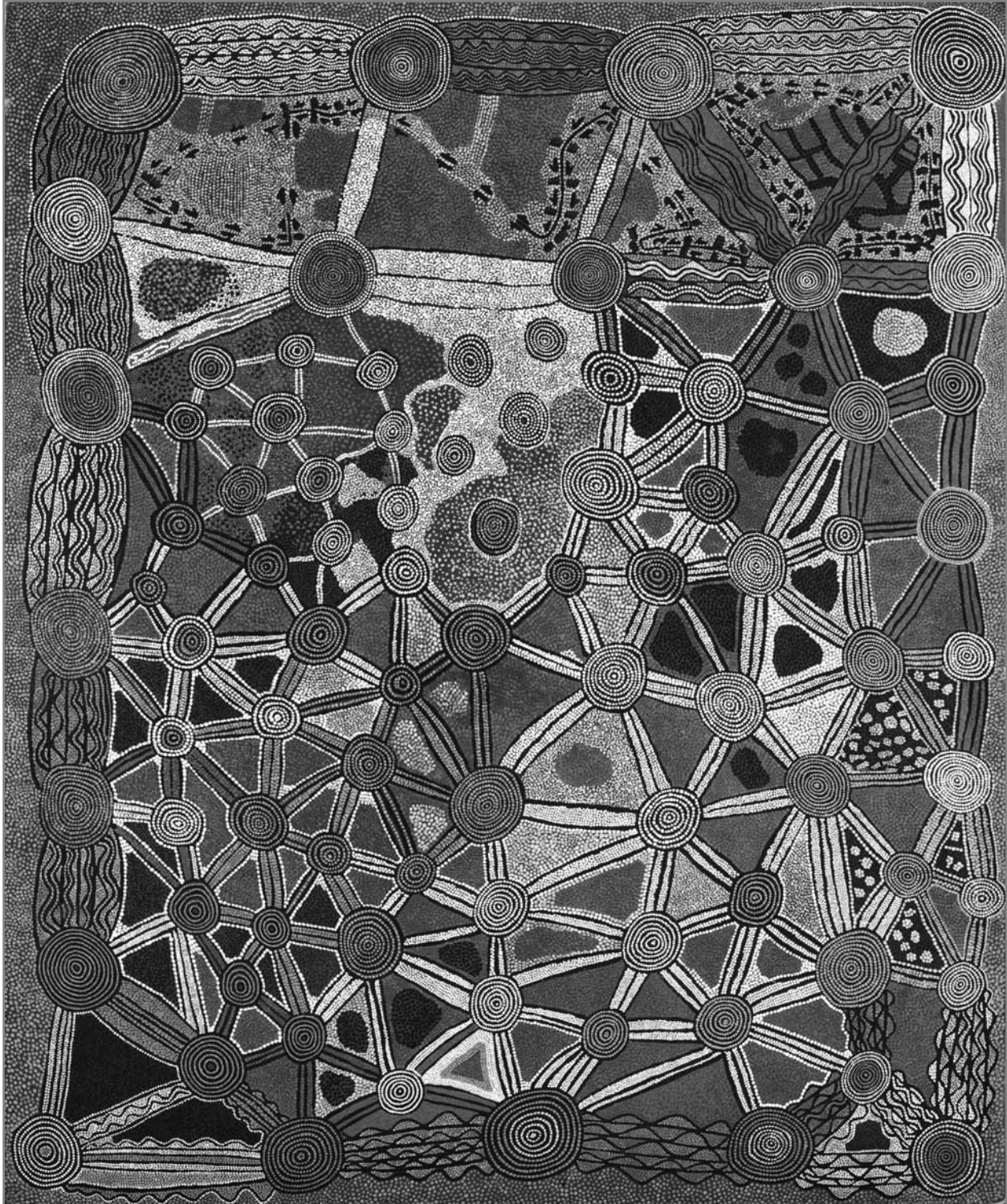


Figure 2. Timmy Payungka Tjapangarti, Kangaroo and Shield People Dreaming at Lake Mackay, 1980. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 187.2 x 154.8 x 3.5 cm. Gift of the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 1995. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. © Timmy Payungka Tjapangarti, reproduced courtesy Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd. Photo: Christopher Snee for AGNSW.

devotion to their art and materials attracted him. Johnson's comments are focused on painting *per se*, but they are the flipside of his own feelings. The disillusionment he describes for himself was characteristic of a counterculture in Sydney of this period, attracted to the non-Western—in Asia, Southeast Asia or Aboriginal communities.

Johnson's comments emphasize a transitional time in Papunya Tula's history, a period in which "no one in the art world had really taken any notice" (Johnson 1990:22). It would have been difficult not to recognize how badly such purchases were needed:

For ten years the artists had been doing these extraordinary paintings and no one in the art world had really taken any notice. They certainly weren't accepted by the art world then. It was a time when any support was really useful. The money I gave Andrew Crocker [then "manager" or advisor of Papunya Tula Artists] was used to buy the next roll of canvas and the next lot of paints and to pay artists. [1990:22]

Johnson had something he could offer. He was an artist, and he saw himself able to provide technical and cultural knowledge relevant for entering the art world, an institution with its own personnel and structure.

Like Margaret Carnegie, the Johnsons sought a closer proximity to the painters, but in their case, as will become clear, the boundaries between the Johnsons and the painters were more permeable. Johnson came back to the Centre and eventually visited Papunya. He tells a striking story of his return to Alice Springs, a story that would be familiar to anyone who has heard collectors speak of taste:

Andrew told us to go down to the Oasis Motel and look at two paintings he'd hung there. We went down and there was a grey Tim Leura and a green Tim Payungka... We raced back to the office and said we wanted to buy them. He was very pleased. Those two paintings have since gone round the world... They were just waiting for someone to put them in the spotlight. [1990:22]

They had a "taste," surely, that others looking at the art might not have had.¹⁴ To Andrew Crocker's dismay, because his own taste was rather more conventional and

avored well-finished and clean-looking paintings, the Johnsons consistently "discovered" what he thought to be undesirable paintings that would be validated later in museum exhibitions around the world. Indeed, it is something of an item of local folklore that the Johnsons found what they considered to be masterpieces in the stockrooms, abandoned more or less by the managers, sometimes out "in the laundry, rolled up and stuck down behind the basis. They were soaking wet with mould on them and so on... Two or three of them are now in public galleries" (Johnson 1990:22).¹⁵

Vivien Johnson, equally an enthusiast of Aboriginal painting and at that time married to Tim, offered a different recollection of what happened at the Oasis Motel. While resonating with Tim's account of their instant recognition of these paintings, her story is nonetheless one in which the pressure of the collectors' *desire* overcomes Crocker's resistance to selling:

It wasn't easy to persuade Andrew Crocker... to sell them—even though the painting company was desperately short of cash.¹⁶ Andrew had plans for "museum quality" paintings like these in his strategy to launch the Papunya painters on the more responsive and lucrative Euro-American market. Fanatics like the Johnsons, who had already rummaged through the entire contents of the company ["the company" refers to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts] storeroom, dragging out every last painting to be photographed for posterity [including a very early experiment on canvas by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula left over from 1975, found stuffed under a sink in the laundry] had no need of conversion. But Andrew was won over by the argument that at least *some* of the very best paintings should stay in Australia to enlighten and inspire future generations of Australians. [Vivien Johnson 1995:9]

This story illustrates the exchange-like nature of the relationships of collection: the concern of collectors to get the objects they desire and the "dealer's" interest in placing objects with people or institutions that will valorize the work by removing it from mere commodity circulation (Weiner 1992). In these transactions, mutual recognitions of value may occur and the long-term relationships between collectors and artists come into consideration. All that is lacking—if it is lack-

ing—is the well-known magic Trobriand exchange partners use on each other!

Collecting, however, also has a vital discursive or representational dimension, as the participation in this “market for art” is typically managed in terms of socially valued ends. Individuals may collect for their own reasons that are not necessarily concerned with the “outside” world’s interests or values. On the other hand, collectors do take into account the impact of their own actions on such arenas and see their activities as valuable as both records of the evolution of an art form and the building of a record of cultural property of the nation—in this case, the preservation of a cultural patrimony for Australia. A collector’s accumulation *can* provide meaningful cultural capital for others. Indeed, this collection—some of which was sold to the Art Gallery of New South Wales—is one of the essential records of the history of acrylic painting for Australian viewers. As Vivien Johnson has often been concerned to remark, many other paintings of the period have gone outside the country.

In Tim’s retrospective construction, a reader may recognize the processes of legitimation at work. It is notable, for example, that he understands his part in this in terms that express his moral accountability to the painters and their cooperative (Papunya Tula Artists). In this account, Tim Johnson is “helping Aborigines,” responding to what was both a local and national expectation in the early 1980s of a transformed relationship between Euro-Australians and Indigenous people. This was a far cry from the “Othering” effects of modernist primitivism so much criticized in the 1980s and 1990s (Thomas 1999), which presumed non-western people to lack contemporaneity with collectors (Fabian 1983). I must imagine such a frame was shaped in his actual encounters with the Aboriginal painters as well as with prevailing political discourses; its presentation has the potential to control or limit possible alternative perceptions one might have of him as a “greedy” collector, motivated only by egotistic desire.¹⁷ Thus, his comments position him within a significant Australian cultural location, and one shared with many other white, counter-cultural Australians from the metropolis.

Tim Johnson writes convincingly of his knowledge about the way art works. At Papunya, Tim believed that his knowledge as an artist—of how the world of contemporary art recognition works—could help a difficult economic situation:

I could feel there was room for more to happen. The artists knew what they were doing, but the company was floundering on economic grounds. Another artist like me could have an input...For example...I could say that artists can paint bad paintings and they could turn out to be the good ones. Because Papunya was a community of artists, I felt like I could take a curatorial role. It came out looking like a promotional role, but it wasn’t intended to be. I didn’t “promote” Aboriginal art, because that puts it back in the tourist area, or ties it up with nationalism and paternalism. It was more a question of repairing an imbalance in our perception and struggling for their rights. They were doing better art than us, and it was being swept under the carpet. I felt that as an artist, I had a role I could play in trying to get it accepted by the art world instead of leaving it in its own isolated category. [1990:22]

In a move that emerged in the marketing of Aboriginal art at this time, Johnson here turns away from regarding Aboriginal paintings as objects of ethnographic knowledge in favor of regarding them simply as art. This suggests standards of evaluation and recognition. Dealers and collectors have often maintained that advisers of Aboriginal art cooperatives lacked judgment of “good” art—that they may prefer *pretty* or nicely done paintings to those that might prove historically more significant, and in this way they may have obscured what is really valuable. The paintings that the Johnsons “rescued” from obscurity have received the recognition they expected.

Johnson not only recognized the interesting qualities of the paintings. As an artist of some reputation and with suitable connections to dealers and curators, he also had the cultural capital to make something happen, with calls to key figures in the Australian art world, such as James Mollison (then Director, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1970–1986), Bernice Murphy (then Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery New South Wales and of *Perspecta* 1981), and Edmund Capon (then Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales). He called Daniel Thomas (then Curator of Contemporary Australian Art, Australian National Gallery, Canberra) and tried to get him to buy the Clifford Possum, *Possum Dreaming*. “Andrew Crocker,” Johnson writes, “had told me that if I could get the National Gallery to buy

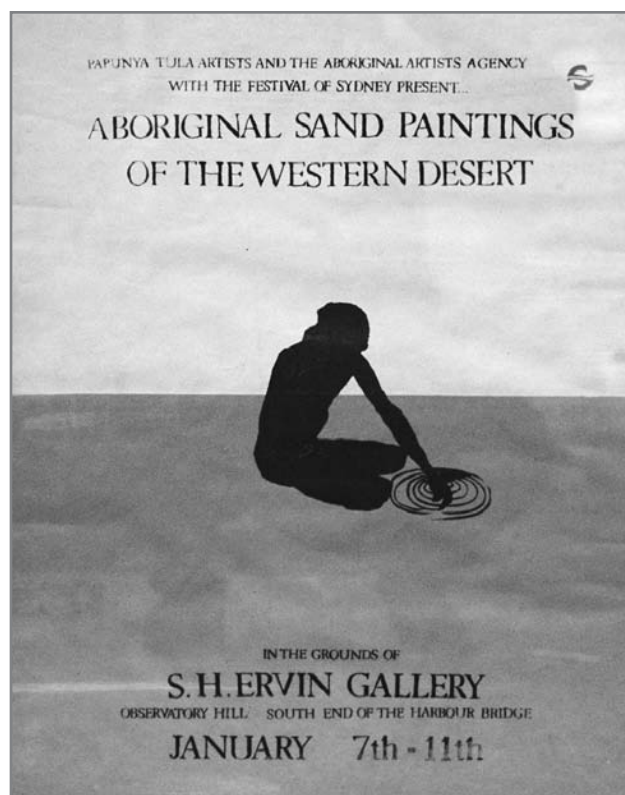


Figure 3. Poster from S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney 1981.

it, he'd buy me a case of Veuve Cliquot champagne. Unfortunately, they didn't buy it." (1990:22). Whether or not Johnson himself was responsible ultimately for some of the success of Papunya Tula, clearly he was part of the wave of recognition moving through the world the curators inhabited. This was a world that no art adviser at the time could reach.

Johnson does not see himself as an ordinary collector. Writing in 1990, he is at pains to construct what we must understand as his own legitimacy, his acceptance by the painters, and a part in the history of the movement. Not just a man with a pocket full of money, he is involved with the painters, and entrusted by them with a goal:

The artists wanted me to organise a ground painting for them in Sydney. The project had been set in motion by the National Gallery and there'd been a grant of \$400 to collect spinifex, ochres and things to make the ground painting, but no arrangements had been made for the installation. It was supposed to be at the National Gallery but they'd been

waiting a year or six months for word. It's a good example of how, at the administrative end, it didn't matter whether it went ahead or not—or when, but meanwhile these artists were out there in the desert waiting and waiting for the white people to give them the signal to do the ground painting—it was really important to *them*. When I turned up, they gave me the job of organising it.

We tried the N.S.W. Art Gallery, who agreed to put it in the middle of the forecourt during the Sydney Festival, but when the date approached they made some excuse and dropped it. But the S.H. Erwin Gallery agreed to have it in their grounds. Two of the artists came down to Sydney for it. A lot of people came to see it and it got good press coverage. It was the first ground painting outside of the desert. [1990:24]

THE OBSESSION FOR KNOWLEDGE

As an artist and a collector, the quality of Tim Johnson's attention to the works seems to be almost obsessive. I use "obsessive" loosely to describe his attention to the products of human activity, for I do not intend to be critical. The sense of ownership and identification gave him and Vivien energy to do something no one else really did at the time, or at least, no one else was able to make happen. Imagine the collector pulling out all the old files and photographs, storing them as an archive of a movement's history, and what a treasure they would be! This could also, in Johnson's case, be an extension of his own art practice—enabling a synergistic convergence. Johnson describes looking:

Through the old stock books and the box of stories to find out more about the development of the movement...The idea I had of documenting the painting movement came from conceptual art—where the idea and not the object was emphasized. It was a way of expanding one's concept of what art was. Instead of art being located in the object, it could be located elsewhere. One could use any medium and anything could be nominated as art. One could record events one encountered in one's life. What the Papunya painters were doing was something I could approach with ideas from conceptual art, it fused art and life and included texts. I could document it—which was valuable,

because so many of the best paintings were disappearing all over the world, and there was no way anyone could track them down. For example, the Australia Council used to provide groups of these early paintings from the '70s as official gifts to other Commonwealth countries—and they'd never be seen again...So I documented the paintings I encountered, I photographed every painting I could find. I also photographed artists—which they approved of. [1990:25]

The Aboriginal art world, like other art worlds, is formed through shared knowledge. While this creates a shared identity, mediated through these objects, there are tensions of difference among the participants. Crocker wasn't kidding when he described the insatiable interest collectors have for "authentic Art News from the Outback" (Crocker 1981), defining himself—of course—at the center. The Johnsons are not unusual in the quality of their interest. Others I have met subsequently have shown the same detailed knowledge of particular objects and their histories, a similar interest in news of the artists. Who is painting well now, one is asked?

It is difficult to know where collecting ends and scholarship begins, but the Johnsons' project was unquestionably not simply one of material acquisition. As collector-scholars, knowledgeable about the requirements of art historical documentation, the Johnsons must have followed the movement of particular paintings through exhibition and sales, their movements overseas. They sought and gained extraordinary knowledge of the paintings, a kind of object-oriented knowledge that has made Vivien Johnson's writings about the art movement distinctive in their focus and a substantial contribution to a non-primitivist art history. In Vivien's writings, particularly, one gains a sense of the institutional location of these paintings and of how the process of legitimation occurred. Their own collection was certainly part of this movement, as it was exhibited in increasingly fine venues—with individual paintings appearing in catalogs and exhibitions all over the world and the collection itself appearing at places such as the Auckland City Gallery—and finally a substantial sale and donation to the Art Gallery of New South Wales!¹⁸

In comparison to Margaret Carnegie, Tim and Vivien Johnson brought a different kind of "capital" to the collection of Aboriginal acrylic painting—em-

anating from middle-class Bohemia and based on Vivien's capacity for scholarly knowledge and Tim's artistic identification. Their knowledge of the movement of paintings is invaluable, and Vivien—at least or especially—has shifted from collecting to curating and documenting the history of the painting movement, establishing in another way its value as culture. In line with the recognition of acrylic painting as fine art, Vivien Johnson's writing emphasizes artistic histories, individual painters and their trajectories, and the movements of particular paintings. While Margaret Carnegie supported exhibitions and curators, her contributions were not fundamentally to scholarship. Vivien Johnson's writing, on the other hand, projected a connoisseur's knowledge into scholarship that could be read by others, that could allow a wider audience or network of people to become part of the circulation of these objects. She has written several books and received an Australian Research Council five-year Fellowship to continue her work. Writing extends the space-time of the objects even beyond the space of exhibition. As coffee table books, they draw in not only wealthy collectors but also curious others who could not necessarily afford to purchase paintings, or learn about them as Margaret Carnegie did, by meeting the painters on her own turf—in Melbourne.

The spirit of Australia's counterculture of the 1970s—cosmopolitan in its international taste but looking for a local, national basis for itself—was distinctly different from the cultural nationalism of Margaret Carnegie's generation. This background was Vivien and Tim Johnson's entry into more participatory relationships—relationships in which Tim sometimes painted jointly with the Aboriginal men or in which the painters stayed with them in Sydney, or with Vivien writing books about Clifford Possum and Michael Nelson Tjakamarra that relied heavily on research and interviewing the painters.

And this informs Vivien Johnson's narration of the history of Papunya Tula through Clifford Possum's work (Vivien Johnson 1994). She describes here, for example, several great paintings of the artist Clifford Possum, as part of his development and of an early lack of recognition. Her narrative established for a broader public an emerging Aboriginal local art history comparable to that treating Euro-Australian art, and also one admonishing Australians for their prior failure to recognize the work. The story begins with

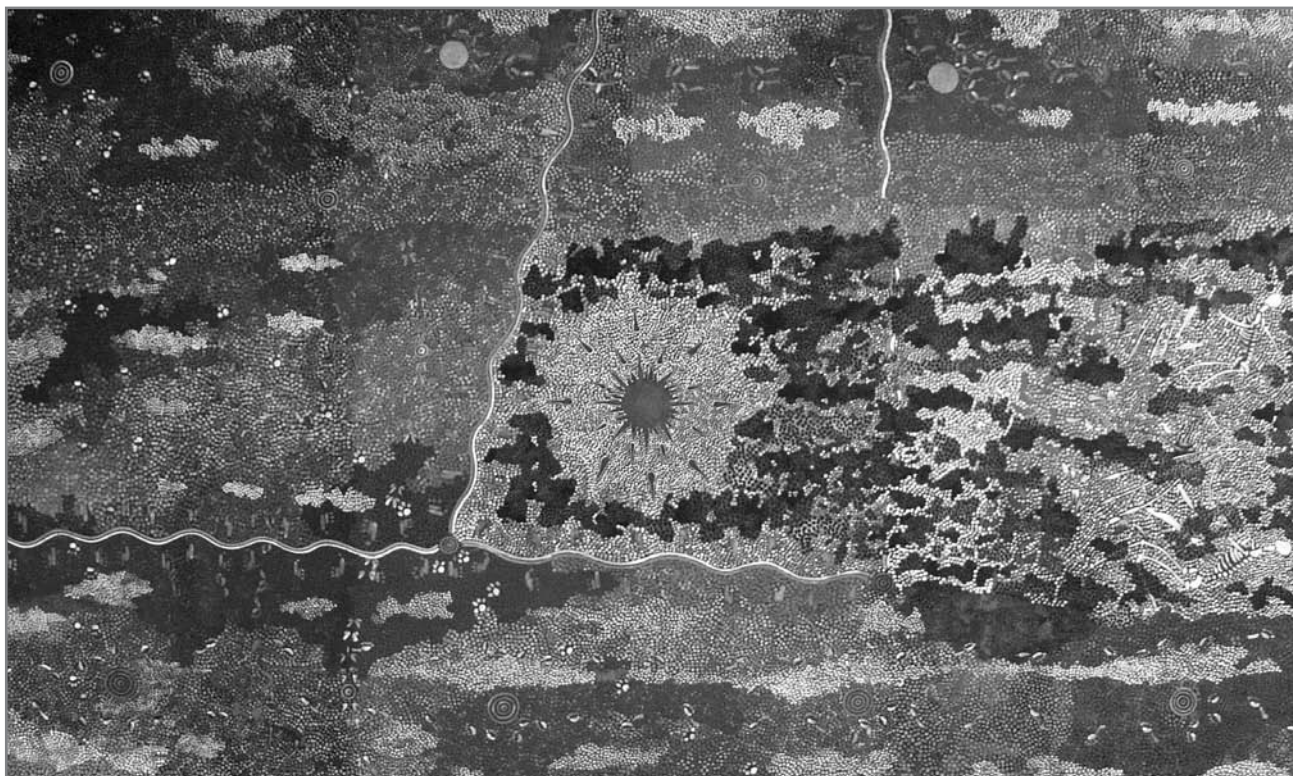


Figure 4. Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Warlugulong* 1977. With permission of the Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Victoria. Copyright courtesy Aboriginal Artists Agency.

the screening of a BBC documentary, *Desert Dreamers*, in late 1976 in England and in Australia early the next year, at a time when sales interest in acrylic paintings was very limited:

The next day a wealthy private collector of Australian art rang Papunya Tula Artists wanting to buy *Warlugulong* 1976. The offer was unprecedented but politely declined, on the grounds that the painting was actually offered to the National Gallery in Canberra, which eventually sent it back to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd. with the excuse that they could not afford the relatively meager amount of money necessary to buy it...It was still unthinkable to buy the work of Aboriginal artists under the category (or in the price range) of “contemporary Australian art.” *Warlugulong* 1976 was shipped off for safekeeping to the Aboriginal Arts Board in Sydney—and what turned out to be for the time being a destiny of far greater obscurity than the one from which it had been saved. For the

next three years it would lie on the concrete floor of the Grace Brothers Furniture Storage Warehouse beside the Pacific Highway in Sydney with the rest of the Board’s collection—gathering dust. [1994:55]

The next of Clifford Possum’s great paintings, *Warlugulong* 1977, she writes, was exhibited at the Realities Gallery in Melbourne for its 1977 exhibition, *Pintupi-Walbiri Ground Paintings*, where it was bought from the exhibition by a bank. This was not a public gallery or museum, unfortunately, and it hung high on the wall of a staff dining room for years, almost unnoticed. The painting, *Kerinyara* was commissioned to decorate the premises of another bank, when one of its executives saw and coveted *Warlugulong* 1977. Finally, Johnson considers the fate of *Yuutjutyungu* as emblematic. Painted in 1979 on a stretcher of 220 x 385 cm., it was sent off to the Aboriginal Arts Board for what was to be an exhibition to tour major Australian cities (1994:69). But

the exhibition did not take place; it was shown only in the lobby of the King's Cross Hilton in Sydney that year. Then it made its way from the Arts Board to the Collector's Gallery in the Rocks area of Sydney, part of the Australian Government's AACP operation. Johnson writes,

In early 1980, about a dozen large canvases from the period 1976–79, including *Yuutjutiyungu* and about twenty smaller works, were sold to a wealthy American collector with an enduring passion for Papunya paintings. The loss of *Yuutjutiyungu* to the nation, which John Kean had raised in his consignment note, was justified by the collector's connection to the Pacific and Asia Museum in Los Angeles. At the time, no Australian art gallery or collecting institutions outside of the Northern Territory...had shown any real interest in the art movement. [1994:74–75]

The asking price in 1979 had been a mere \$1425.00. For such small sums of money, it is now known, Richard Kelton built a stunning collection in the United States, and the Australian nation was threatened with the loss of its own cultural patrimony.

This is a particular kind of knowledge, knowledge beyond the “anonymous” and “timeless” representations said to be typical of “primitive art” at the time (Clifford 1988; Price 1989). Vivien understands these movements—critical finally to understanding the development of a base for an art movement—in individual and personalistic terms. Every object has a story, a provenience—not only for Vivien Johnson, but also Margaret Carnegie. Only a few people would have tracked Clifford Possum's paintings by name through exhibitions in Melbourne (Georges Gallery 1982; Roar Studios 1983) and Sydney (Mori Gallery 1983), and *Bushfire Dreaming* (1982) from its original exhibition in Brisbane in 1983 to its acquisition by the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1984. But, like Tim Johnson, Vivien Johnson is not just an abstract collector; she is concerned that paintings remain in Australia. A kind of nationalist imagination remains at work, mediated by her sensibility to the process of exhibition, sale and display.

In the course of collecting, and of building scholarship, the Johnsons must have traveled to many Aboriginal communities. They were welcomed, in part

no doubt, because they were buyers or because they could circulate information to others. Their possible intrusiveness, their obsessions, could be tolerated because advisers needed support and reliable contacts down south. If a collector is remembered for stamping his feet in frustration, he (or she) is still unlikely to be exiled from the network. Such networks, in all art worlds, are in this sense somewhat self-serving and not always structures of mutual admiration, however much participants wish to be loved for their deserving qualities. If their entrée relied largely on the mediation of art advisers (see Johnson 1995), their extraordinary interest and passion combined these sources of knowledge into innovative and insightful accounts. Through these contacts, the Johnsons developed strong personal ties with some of the painters. Tim has collaborated on numerous paintings with Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and also with Clifford Possum.¹⁹

It seems unquestionable, then, that the Johnsons' collecting and publicity activity has been part of the process of legitimating Papunya painting. They drew on already-existing networks and provided paintings as well as scholarship. At the same time, they do participate in the conundrum of collecting; it is refracted in their attempts at justification. It is difficult to imagine that they—like Margaret Carnegie, the wealthy Melbourne patron who sold part of her collection of early Papunya painting to the National Gallery of Victoria—haven't been viewed by some as building the value of their own collection through these enterprises. The work of building appreciation is always also the work of increasing value.

My argument is not that their attention to Papunya painting was directed toward personal financial gain. One ought to take extremely seriously what Anthony Knight, another collector and part-time dealer (owner of the Café Alcaston and the Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne) once told me (personal communication, July 1991): that the thrill of collecting is having one's taste proved right, ahead of its time!

However, there are socially significant frameworks to these processes. To my foreign eye, for example, the Johnsons have represented a special moment and type of Australian intellectual, at the generational edge of Sydney's famous libertarian cultural movement. Their sympathies with Aboriginal people make that apparent, an association that is extended in Tim's painterly fascination with a range of alternative cultural fram-

ings of spirituality, the disillusionment with Sydney that led him to come to Alice Springs. Vivien's work shows a long-term concern with cultural activity that resists the typical Adornoesque rejections of popular culture and accompanying narratives of homogenization (see Johnson 1988).

It is easy to see that their activities with Aboriginal art and artists have conveyed a load of cultural capital to them, internationally or not. For example, an art dealer selling Tim Johnson's work in the early 1990s saw his work as concerned with "lost cultures—there are images from Tibetans, Aboriginal Australia (the dots), Red Indians (peace pipe)" (personal communication with Judith Beehan in Canberra, July 12, 1991). It had authenticity, however, based on his associations: "He's been living at Papunya for years and knows the elders. The elders have given him some Dreamings to paint" (personal communication with Judith Beehan in Canberra, July 12, 1991). The dealer also had some paintings he had done with the Aboriginal painters Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and George Bush Tjangala. There is a certain superficiality to dealers when they try to find a connection that will make a sale, so one cannot take these comments as a measure of Johnson's attitude—but only of the effect of his association.

AUSTRALIANS

Is it possible to understand the attitude of the Johnsons' collecting? A few friends attempted to describe the ambiance. It was not the work of a wealthy patron, emanating from a Bohemian style rather distinct from that of Margaret Carnegie in the up-scale Spring Street apartment in Melbourne. Their stance became a recognizably Australian one for me: non-materialist, alternative culture, perhaps, but also nationally identified—or nationally located. Their placement within a particular sector of Australian cultural life may help explain some of the possibilities they sensed in Papunya painting. I want to refuse, however, a simple reduction of the complex orientation of these people to the single strand of national identity by a fuller account of the mediation of value through the specific domains through which the cultural convergence they imagine is articulated and evaluated.

Australian artists at this time faced a particular predicament of marginalization as provincial outsid-

ers in the international art world (Burn et al. 1988). Indeed, in a kind of high culture parallel to cultural imperialism generally, the growing influence of an international Modernist avant-garde in Australia,²⁰ emanating from the United States, was a source of anxiety. The anxiety of influence, as it is frequently invoked, threatened to make Australian artists invisible and render them powerless.

Tim Johnson was saliently among those Australian artists who participated eagerly in a reaction against the supposedly international but North American—based Formalist Modernism. Conceptual art and performance art provided artistically a "series of alternative strategies"—along with artist-run cooperatives, collective art production, and other art practices that shared a focus on the dematerialization of the art object." (Lumby 1995:18)—to serve this opposition. Australian Conceptual Art, especially, was rooted not only in a reaction against the commodification of the art object—central to its significance in the United States—but as much in a desire to reply to the perceived cultural imperialism of the American art scene. Thus, the critique of Modernism was given a distinctively Australian orientation in its adaptation, where it "was linked from the outset to a series of ongoing questions about the nature of nationality, identity and locality" (Lumby 1995:18).

Johnson is part of an Australian art movement in which the shift away from the dream of a universal formalist language was accompanied by a rigorous reconsideration of national, local, and regional cultural forms and traditions (Lumby 1995:18). Strangely cosmopolitan, Australians of this period wrestled with a range of influences from the United States, and the manifestations within the arts were perhaps the most articulate of the expressions of a new national identity emerging among the younger elite; an identity asserted against that expressed in the art of the United States (Thomas 1995:33).

Thus, the artwork of the 1970s combined two sets of questions. The marginal status of Australian artists in relation to the international art world framed a set of questions about identity and culture, but the rapidly changing racial and ethnic composition of Australia's population had also prompted a broader reconsideration of national identity (see Hamilton 1990). And this process of reconsideration and debate, "in which Australian identity emerges as a process of imagining what

Australia might look like” (Lumby 1995:22), is the content of such an identity. The artists of this period are singularly concerned with “the interplay of cultural identities,” the “flux of cultural identity,” (Lumby 1995:22) and they explore the process of constructing identity itself.

The Johnsons’ is, of course, only one formulation of Australia’s national obsession, where “painting becomes the infinite imagining of a non-industrial nirvana, and the artist an alchemist whose action brings together exponents of exquisite and elusive cultures on the grounds of future possibility” (Benjamin 1995:59). Indeed, his fusion of Aboriginal and Chinese painting, “led to identifying myself as an Australian artist in that I was starting to see Australia as part of Asia instead of as part of Europe”²¹ (Zurbrugg 1991:50). The argument the Johnsons gave Andrew Crocker was that the paintings—or some of them—should stay in Australia. And, after all, Tim Johnson himself was working out of a distinctively Australian framework in his own painting. The paintings should go into the collection of contemporary *Australian art*.

From what I have been told, the Johnsons were not house-proud, with their paintings tastefully and charmingly deployed. The paintings, visitors reported, were everywhere: rolled up, stored in piles. Their social boundaries were equally permeable. Occasionally painters like Michael Nelson or Clifford Possum stayed to visit, as friends. The ambiance is far different from the rather refined upper-class Spring Street apartments of collectors such as Beverly and Anthony Knight (owners of the Café Alcaston), or their neighbor Margaret Carnegie in Melbourne. Indeed, several of my Australian friends distinguished broadly between the hipper, more yuppie—young urban professionals—context in which Aboriginal art circulates in Sydney, and the wealthier boarding school patronage offered in Melbourne. If Margaret Carnegie could insert Aboriginal art into the National Gallery of Victoria where she was a life trustee, the Johnsons operated more through the world of connections forged in contemporary painting and culture, Sydney-style. Margaret Carnegie and Beverly Knight were very pleased to know the Aboriginal painters they admired, but the bohemian style was more involved in blurring the boundaries between “us” and “them.”²²

The bohemian, or participatory, style did experience its limits in cross-cultural activity, in not respect-

ing boundaries. He may have thrown himself into settings and situations, assured of his own good intentions, but Tim Johnson’s identification with Aboriginal people was not always well-received by others. “Tim has this, oh you know, he has this *special feel* for Aboriginal people,” an art adviser said with irritation. Indeed, almost every art writer of the period noted their sense of unease with Johnson’s “appropriations” of other traditions.²³

A similar critical question was raised about the celebration of “convergence” in his painting, in a late 1987 exhibition at Sydney’s Mori Gallery. Terry Smith wrote, that, “Tim Johnson seeks a closeness based on self-submergence and identification. He has been making paintings collaboratively since 1983 with Papunya artists” (1987:3). Smith praised Johnson’s collection of “those paintings from the later 1970s that failed to fit into marketable models”—the *bad* paintings that are really *good*, as Johnson said—on the grounds that they can “counter the sense of an occluding, decorative pleasantness settling on all contemporary Aboriginal art” with diversity, “examples of internal questioning, historical disruption, ironic cross-referencing, the expression of passing emotions” (1987:3). While Johnson had done the artists “a great service” in this, his “mixing of Papunya and Buddhist imagery” writes Smith, “is still a rather standard strategy of making every image equal, as if any globalising religion would do. The tentative sketchiness of his technique avoids the coercive power of confrontation, but it pales into passivity. Who is doing the converging?” (Smith 1987:3). Many would agree, no doubt, with Terry Smith’s view about Johnson: “Unusual...is his degree of naivety about the circulation of social power through visual imagery” (Smith 1991:541; see also McLean 1998).

Yet, this is a circuit through which paintings pass on the trajectory of legitimation, through the subjectivities of those who might buy or collect them. Perhaps such desire can be worked into a number of alternative trajectories—some more productive for Aboriginal interests than others. An Australian collector of acrylic paintings must surely be more sensitive to the political situation of its producers than American buyers—far removed from immediate contact with painters and their world. Indeed, a cultural worker like Johnson could ill afford to ignore the circumstances of Aboriginal painters. But sharing their plight—identifying with them—could offer considerable and distinctive cultural capital to art-

ists like him and others. There is an extent to which it is possible, or even necessary for those involved with Aboriginal art, to legitimize themselves—as knowledgeable or expert—through their sympathy for Aboriginal people, and knowledge of how hard it is out there for art advisers. Thus, there is cultural capital available for those who can make these journeys successfully, a form of cultural capital on which art advisers can trade, and which they may not wish to share fully with collectors or dealers. In the 1980s, Aborigines could provide whites with cultural capital, knowledge exchangeable for prestige or status. By the late 1980s, such local knowledge was fully exchangeable, when for example the famous author Bruce Chatwin was invited to visit Kintore by aspiring white writers who were working there in the community.

As Australians, the Johnsons and Carnegie positioned themselves differently from American collectors, such as Richard Kelton and later John Kluge, who eschewed the political content of the work and the living presence of the artists in favor of more primitivist orientations. In this, they follow the directions outlined by what I have previously described as Nicholas Thomas' (1999) differentiation of "settler primitivism" from "modernist primitivism"—the former of which necessarily recognizes the coeval presence of indigenous people with the settler society. The Western Desert acrylic art movement emerged during a period of the rapid articulation of Aboriginal civil rights, land rights, and intellectual property claims. An Australian collector/patron could hardly ignore these claims and collect as an innocent bystander to their history. They could, however, work in the space of repairing this history.

The relationship collector/patrons have with living artists is an important issue for my analysis. Of course, for successful contemporary artists, maintaining a relationship with their buyers is vital—and many patrons see having a relationship with artistic genius as part of what they buy. In Margaret Carnegie's case, she certainly expressed her interest in making contact with the artist behind the paintings, Aboriginal or otherwise, but while her pleasure in getting to know the Pintupi man Nosepeg Tjupurrula was prominent in her story, her capacity to know and be with Aboriginal painters was limited—perhaps by class but certainly by age. In contrast, Tim and Vivien Johnson demonstrated themselves to be very participatory, trying to overcome the distance separating them—as patrons—from the Aboriginal painters.

To accept (or acknowledge too much) this separation would have made them *simply* collectors, which is not at all how they have understood themselves.

These are people who, for their own identity, have constituted Australia as an authentic cultural space, and they have put intellectual energy toward the creation of an authentically Australian culture as "culturally productive." This in turn represents their objectification of the sensibility of Aboriginal acrylic painting in Australia's national space—a sensibility that Vivien Johnson endeavors to sustain by working assiduously against the ravages of outright commodification and piracy that have arisen through the massive explosion of interest in Aboriginal art. Just as she has helped to build the rationale and infrastructure for protecting artists' intellectual property rights, she has defended the local art centers that came together to help prevent exploitation but which have been overwhelmed by the growth of the private sector and its interest in Aboriginal "star" artists:

Art centres have a very important role in relation to the Indigenous art industry, in that they're nurturing new talent within the communities for people who don't yet have an established name and they are also looking after the older people who are no longer able to continue painting, but who have contributed so much to the art centre's functioning while they were still able to paint. [Haskin 2004]

Her knowledge of the market, of collectors and exhibitions, and her sympathies with the painting movement have allowed and led her to make interventions that "combine"—or synthesize—Indigenous and non-Indigenous concerns to sustain Indigenous objectives. This is a very different synthesis from the one articulated in Margaret Carnegie's practice.

CONCLUSION

My focus in this article is not on the Aboriginal acrylic paintings or their makers, but on those who participate in the most valued form of their circulation. I show how forms of involvement in the circulation of these paintings—their exchange and accumulation—create relationships with a wide range or network of persons, expanding the space-time personae

of the collectors. I believe it may be useful to think of these persons as “patrons” rather than simply as “collectors.” They are not, for example, mainly concerned to pull acrylic paintings out of circulation in order to “possess” them—although they certainly desire to obtain what they regard as the “best” paintings—as much as they are with trying (1) to help the painting movement gain a footing in the larger world or (2) to overcome the dispersal of the paintings in some kind of circulatory oblivion. They do not emphasize their buying in terms of personal pleasure, for example, as many connoisseurs have been said to do (Price 1989). Always, their own national identity as Australians has significance. As patrons, their activities have gathered up a remnant of paintings, what counts as a significant representation of the larger corpus, instead of having these Australian valuables “go overseas.” Finally, then, we might regard their activities as seeking to give the paintings—and the painting tradition—a position in the Australian national cultural space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

¹ According to her obituary, Margaret Carnegie was the “daughter of Melbourne trader Henry Allen, whose ancestors were of Huguenot and Irish origin. She was educated at Lauriston Girls School (in Melbourne), then at 17, a Swiss finishing school” (Jones 2002:11). At the Swiss finishing school, she describes herself as acquiring a different perspective on history. Among the events she narrated was that of overhearing two English girls speaking, an event like that many Australians have experienced: “One was complaining. She said: ‘Another Australian girl, probably a butcher’s daughter.’ God, the English were snobs!” (Aiton 1992:4).

² Carnegie’s collection of Australian art was the first and only private collection to be exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria. As Philip Jones (2002:11) notes, she was forced to sell it for financial reasons in 1971, receiving \$500,000 for 460 works.

³ After her collection of Australian painting, Carnegie built another one of ceramics from Southeast Asia and the Islands, donating that one to the Museum of the Northern Territory in Darwin. Colin Jack-Hinton was director of the Museum of the Northern Territory in Darwin and, interestingly, one of the first significant purchasers of paintings from Papunya Tula Artists.

⁴ She is referring to Utah Construction/Utah International, and specifically to its CEO at the time, Allen Christensen. In 1957, Christensen created the Christensen Fund, an independent private foundation that has long supported work in the arts and conservation science fields—including Northern Australia and Melanesia.

⁵ Edwards was Curator of the South Australian Museum and later Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts. As I have written elsewhere, Edwards was a prime mover in developing support for Papunya Tula Artists and acrylic painting (see Myers 2001, 2002).

⁶ Coombs had been Governor General of the Australian Reserve Bank and an important architect of the post-war reconstruction before turning his attention to the arts and to Aboriginal affairs. One of Australia’s most outstanding and influential public servants, Coombs advised and served seven prime ministers over a 30-year period. He was known for his profound influence behind the scenes in business and politics and for his concern to establish a distinctive social, economic and cultural place for all Australians, particularly Aboriginal Australians. See Rowse 2001.

⁷ Geoffrey Bardon (1979, 1991) was the schoolteacher at Papunya whose collaboration with local Aboriginal men led to the development of Papunya Tula Artists and the Western Desert acrylic painting movement. A recent film, *Mr. Patterns*, gives an insightful account of his life and circumstances.

⁸ Carnegie’s repeated use of “Yank” to refer to Americans marks her, in my mind, as World War Two vintage Australian, as did a lot of her other slang.

⁹ The main sale, to which she was referring, took place in auction through Christie’s in 1993, at which Carnegie placed 30 paintings for sale.

¹⁰ In making this point, I am drawing on an emerging paradigm in material culture and science studies, emphasizing the complex relationships between people and objects, as extending formations of personhood. (See Gell 1998; Latour 1993; Munn 1986; Strathern 1999).

¹¹ Carnegie wrote books on both of these figures of Australian history.

¹² For a sense of this dynamic, see Pynter 2004.

¹³ The reference to “big canvases” refers to a movement to use stretched Belgian linen as a support for painting instead of the previous use of 24 x 36 inch canvas boards.

¹⁴ See Price 1989 on connoisseurs and “taste.”

¹⁵ This is recognizably a narrative of the connoisseur defining taste, in the individual recognition of true value.

¹⁶ An advisor at a different Aboriginal art center once described a collector to me in very graphic terms—“stamping his little feet,” out of frustrated desire to obtain the paintings he wanted.

¹⁷ Indeed, I know—because I saw it happen—that in 1981 one of the Papunya Tula painters repeatedly dragged Tim Johnson out to help him with his broken down vehicle, saying that as temporary art adviser he had to “help Aboriginal people.”

¹⁸ See Johnson 1995:13 note 2.

¹⁹ As Terry Smith (1991:541) has noted, Johnson was granted the permission to use the technique of dotting in his own paintings.

²⁰ This was summed up by critic Terry Smith, writing in *Artforum*:

A cruel irony of provincialism is that while the artist pays exaggerated homage to the conceptions of art history and the standards for judging “quality,” “significance,” “interest,” etc. of the metropolitan center...to the international audience he is almost invisible. [Smith 1974]

²¹ The rest of what Johnson says here is quite interesting about what attracts him to Aboriginal and Buddhist art, a relationship between art and life, that painting invokes a force:

I looked at a lot of Tibetan art which tied in with practising Buddhism and that allowed me to get into the theory behind making images—wherein you are invoking something. The theory allowed me to understand Aboriginal art better, because if you paint an Ancestral design that has a link to an Ancestor and to a story from the Dreamtime, that design summons up the Ancestor and the ancestral force involved in the event being portrayed. In the same way, if you paint a Buddha you invoke the Buddha and the Buddha acts in your life or in other people’s lives...you create a model of an event that you would like to occur, and you meditate on the

model in the hope that this will create the event in real life. [Zurbrugg 1991:50]

²² Margaret Carnegie pointed out to me that her husband, Douglas, a grazer, was “very conservative.”

²³ In responding to an exhibition Johnson had with Clifford Possum in 1988, Bronwyn Watson drew attention to the precarious nature of the intercultural art field in Australia, policed by many parties:

Johnson has many critics. Originally a conceptual artist, he is now known for his use of religious and mystical symbols. Much of his work revolves around the appropriation of Buddhist and Aboriginal images.

Because of this he is regarded with considerable suspicion by urban black artists and many whites who claim his work borders on plagiarism. He has been accused of trivialising sacred symbols, of mixing images and globalising religion.

Johnson replies to his critics by saying that his work is harmless, that the subject matter is good, not evil, and that all his imagery (Australian landscape, myths, Buddha, poetry etc) is worth seeing or experiencing.

Johnson, who is constantly having to justify himself, notes that “I have chosen to involve myself [in Aboriginal culture] by visiting Aboriginal communities in Central Australia and by maintaining friendships with artists. [Watson 1988]

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