

Richard Bell
**Bell's Theorem:
Aboriginal Art –
It's a White
Thing!**

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Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing!

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Excerpt from the webpage artist Richard Bell's page *BELL'S THEOREM: ABORIGINAL ART - It's a white thing!*, found at <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>

Introduction

This paper has been written to articulate some thoughts on this subject that may not yet be in the public domain. I am the primary source for most of the information gathered (often through personal experience or discussions with numerous people). I must say here that I am not an academic. Consequently, the style and tone of delivery will chop and change. It will be conversational, playful, serious, tongue in cheek, moralistic, tolerant, sermonistic and informative.

Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times. A commodity. The result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal. They are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are in the fields of Anthropology and "Western Art". It will be shown here how key issues inter-relate to produce the phenomenon called Aboriginal Art and how those issues conspire to condemn it to non-Aboriginal control.

Western Art: Its effect

During the last century and a quarter Western Art has evolved into an elaborate, sophisticated and complex system. This system supplies venues (museums, galleries, etc), teaching facilities (art education institutions, drawing classes, etc) and referees (art critics) and offers huge rewards for the chosen few elite players in the game (including artists, curators, art critics, art dealers and even patrons). This arrangement is not dissimilar to modern spectator sports. It is also not unlike ancient religions – substitute Gods, sacrificial offerings, High Priests, etc.

Like some voracious ancient God, Western Art devours all offerings at will. Sometimes the digestion will be slow and painful. However, it is resilient and will inexorably continue on its pre-ordained path that is to analyse and pigeonhole everything.

Western Art is the product of Western Europeans and their colonial offspring. It imposes and perpetuates superiority over art produced in other parts of the World. For example, the African Masks copied by Picasso. Westerners drooled at Picasso's originality - to **copy** the African artists while simultaneously ignoring the genius of the Africans.

Any new "art movement" is, after the requisite hoopla and hype, **named** and given an

ISM, that is duly attached to the end of a noun, e.g.. "Modernism". This "nounism" doesn't transfer to non-Western art. Words like primitive, ethnographic, provincialist or folk-art suffice. Below the ISMs are "Schools". A noun followed by School. For example, the Heidelberg School.

Aboriginal Art is considered a "movement" and as yet has not graduated to ISM status by being "named. I shall do so now. I **name** Aboriginal Art **HIEROWISM**. It is the modern hieroglyphics. Also, there is always controversy (lotsa rows) so I think it's appropriate. So. How is it that an unqualified Black **can't** name an Art Movement?

Prior to the 20th Century, art produced by Westerners from former colonies was not considered to be up to the standard of art produced by resident Europeans. The North Americans demanded, and begrudgingly attained, parity with their European cousins. In fact the axis of power has actually shifted away from Paris to New York and their artists are at the forefront of Western Art today. Not so their Antipodean counterparts who struggle with what has been called **The Provincialism Problem** (Terry Smith in his 1974 article of the same name). This has produced a cultural cringe of massive proportions that requires artists from provincial outposts to be able to merely aspire to mediocrity.

Provincialism permeates most levels of Australian society. Consequently, it weighs heavily on the industry catering for the art of Aboriginal Australians and renders most of those involved in that industry unworthy of the roles **they** have given themselves. It is unwise to market Aboriginal Art from the Western Art aesthetic and *attach* an Aboriginal Spirituality (an exploitative tactic that suggests that the purchaser can **buy** some). Perhaps it would be wiser to market this form of art from a purely Western construct. Demand that it be seen for what it is – as being among the World's best examples of Abstract Expressionism. Ditch the pretence of spirituality that consigns the art to ethnography and its attendant "glass ceiling". Ditch the cultural cringe and insert the art at the level of the best in western art avoiding the provincialism trap.

Spirituality and Ethnocentricity

There is no doubt that attaching Spirituality during a sale of Aboriginal Art helps greatly in closing a deal. Western dissatisfaction with Christianity since the 1960s has sharpened focus in this area. However, important matters haven't been given due consideration. Matters such as:

The number of artists holding the knowledge is declining rapidly and the younger people are reluctant to take up the "Old Ways";

Given the above. A dying, soon dead, culture

is being raked over;

The image of the "Noble Savage" (from whence comes the spirituality) implies a position of racial superiority (consciously or not);

It is not necessary to invoke spirituality when promoting artists as individuals. Who they are. Where they're from. What they know. What they've done. These things become crucial. Perhaps the curators of the early shows were in such a rush to show the works that they hid their unprofessional (and superior) behaviour behind the "collective CV";

That a proliferation of white **experts** is belittling the people who own the culture. For example, the **NAMED** white expert is far better known than the mostly **unnamed** Aboriginal artists from the famous **Papunya School** of painters;

That the lack of Aboriginal input into areas of concern is continually overlooked has created the feeling that the culture is being stolen, etc.

Other important issues arise out of the "Ethnographic" approach to Aboriginal Art. Anthropologists play a crucial role in the *interpretation* of Aboriginal Art. Their approach is, by definition, ethnographic and its classification system fits cosily into Ethnographic Art. Consider the classification of "Urban Aboriginal Art". This is the work of people descended from the original owners of the heavily populated areas of the continent. Through a brutal colonisation process much of the culture has disappeared. However, what has survived is important. **The Dreamtime** is the past, the present and the future. The Urban artists are still telling dreamtime stories, albeit, contemporary ones. The Dreamings (of the favoured "real Aborigines" from the least settled areas) actually pass deep into Urban territories. In short, the Dreamings cannot be complete without reciprocity between the supposed real Aboriginals of the North and the supposed Unreal or inauthentic Aboriginals of the South.

Many Urban artists have rejected the ethno-classification of Aboriginal Art to the extent they don't participate in Aboriginal shows. They see themselves as **artists** – not as *Aboriginal* artists.

The real problem arises out of the very nature of Western Art. Westerners need to sort and categorise everything in order to make sense of the World. That they do so in an ethnocentric manner is academic. The world of music is not dominated by Western Classical music - different styles stand alongside each other with extensive cross-fertilisation from different cultures. Not so in visual art.

The Art Centres

Aboriginal Art has foreshadowed the establishment of community art centres throughout remote areas. These centres assist

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by providing advice, marketing opportunities/strategies, art supplies and documentation. The contact person is the Art Advisor who is almost always White. These centres are run according to the community's needs and aspirations.

The Art Centre takes a one third commission of the (wholesale) price for the services it provides. It consigns work to a network of galleries throughout Australia and overseas at an agreed retail price. For example, the art centre values a work at \$600 and its share is \$200. The gallery takes a 40% commission for selling the work; therefore the retail price is \$1000. Thus the artist receives \$400 or 40% plus the applicable service provided by the art centre.

That scenario works well for artists operating on that level of income. If the artist is on a ten fold larger income, the level of costs incurred by the art centre may be the same, or comparable, yet the artists cut remains at 40%. Well below the 60% (minus costs) that other Australian artists receive. In any event, the amount of money an Aboriginal artist gets, rarely, if ever, stays in his/her pockets. Generally, it is shared among family and friends or their community.

The Government's continued financial support of the Art Centre movement ensures some level of Government control over the industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. Their considerable contribution makes it look good. They think it justifies their appropriation of Aboriginal imagery in advertising campaigns, etc. They think that they have bought our culture. Well, soorrree. It never happened.

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Continue reading at:

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