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# Australian Women's Aboriginal Art:

## *Success or Sell-Out?*

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In looking at the 20th century art market, we see that Australian female Aboriginal artists were under-valued, under-researched, and poorly marketed. Not only were they paid significantly less than male Aboriginal artists, but they were also considered less talented. The new millennium however shows a shift away from these sexist notions**.** With exposure to Western materials**,** women Aboriginal artists developed a new, distinct style that has become exceedingly popular among art historians, collectors and gallery-goers in Australia and internationally (Fig. 1). Unlike men's Aboriginal art, the woman's new style is defined through a fusion of Western materials and Aboriginal influences. This fusion, however, has made critics skeptical about its authenticity. These critics perceive Aboriginal women artists as sell-outs for favoring Western artistic traditions over Aboriginal ones because they want Aboriginal art to remain untouched by Western culture and modernization. Thus, we will see how the authenticity of women's Aboriginal art is in question due to their contact with Westerners in the twentieth century.

In 1971, Geoffrey Bardon was the first white Australian to go into central Australia, otherwise known as the outback (Fig. 1). Bardon visited the Papunya community and started giving out bark to men and silk to women for them to paint on. While Aboriginal men depicted "important" stories on bark, women were encouraged to weave customary batik items in response to Australia's growing tourist industry (Johnson 352, Fig. 2). Not only were these batik items perceived as "kitschy and touristy" but they were also viewed as "purely utilitarian and functional," leaving little room for innovation, individuality, or personal expression by the Aboriginal artist. As a result, Aboriginal women suffered tremendous discrimination in the 1980s art market since they were

perceived as merely "craft workers" who did not possess the skill or creativity to paint like men (Perkins 5).

The devaluation of Aboriginal women's art was also evident in the economic disparity between sales of male and female artwork. For instance, in the Yirrkala art community of Northern Australia, male artists earned on average more than *three* times as much as women' artists (Johnson 352). Even more astonishing, in Arnhem Land, one of the most bustling centers for Aboriginal art, men earned *twelve* times more than Aboriginal women artists (Johnson 352). These disproportionate statistics illustrate the "classic gender issue" that a man's work is considered more valuable and more important than a woman's work (Johnson 352).

But as contact increased between Aboriginal artists and White Australians, women started gaining more attention and more money, along with Western materials from art advisors (Fig. 5). Since the days of Geoffrey Bardon, governmental agencies and missionaries have been opening art centers in remote areas of Australia to stimulate economic activity among impoverished Aboriginal communities. Inspired by Bardon's work, these centers were established to teach Aboriginals how to paint with acrylics and brushes on canvas, instead of painting with traditional ground ochres and emu fats on the body or on caves (Bell 96, Fig 4). Particularly at schools in the Eastern Desert community of Utopia, Aboriginal women seized the opportunity to experiment with the freedom of new forms, media and designs (Bell 96). The results were dramatic, as women Aboriginal artists began expressing their cultural identity in novel and extraordinary ways that differed drastically from men's Aboriginal art (Hamilton 74).

We can see this distinct difference in style when comparing Michael Japangardi Poulson's "Honey Ant Dreaming" (Fig. 5) to Ada Bird Petyarre's "Aweyle for the Mountain Devil Lizard" (Fig. 6). Petyarre's painting shows how women apply paint more thickly and liberally than male Aboriginal artists. Some women artists like Petyarre paint in this manner because they are treating the canvas as if they were painting the body for ceremonies. Petyarre's painting also reflects how Aboriginal women incorporate a wider palette to include pinks, blues, and oranges, instead of the traditional red, brown and black ochres that men use. We also see how the women do not use grid-like forms, meticulous dots, concentric circles, or animal iconography commonly seen in men's painting like Poulson's. Though Poulson and Petyarre illuminate gender differences, the women's distinct new style is best recognized in the artwork of the late Aboriginal artist Emily Kngwarreye.

In her painting "Alhalkere Dreaming" Kngwarreye paints in the typical women's style with congealed brushstrokes, nontraditional colors, and an absence of animal iconography (Fig. 7). Many critics assert that Kngwarreye's painterly brushstrokes resemble the illusiveness of 19$^{th}$ century Impressionism. In fact, if viewers saw a Kngwarreye painting completely out of context, they might attribute it to Impressionism or even 1950s Abstract Expressionism. Kngwarreye has often been compared to European and American masters like Claude Monet, Mark Rothko, and is even said to have a sense of color like Henri Matisse (Cadzow 28, Fig. 7 & 8). Since her work looks Impressionistic, Abstract, and perhaps even Fauvist, it is clear that Kngwarreye's style does not subscribe to conventions that Aboriginal men use in their desert paintings.

Like Kngwarreye, critics love to compare other women Aboriginal artists to the European masters. For instance, Gloria Tamerre Petyarre's painting "Untitled Leaves" resembles the Impressionist paintings of Vincent Van Gogh (Fig. 9 & 10). Like Van Gogh, Petyarre paints with thick, short brushstrokes to convey a landscape inspired by impressions of natural light and color. On the other hand, woman Aboriginal artist Rosella Namok creates paintings that appear very abstract like Marcel Duchamp, or minimalist Frank Stella (Fig. 11 & 12). Though minimalist artists like Stella aimed to strip down art to its most fundamental meaning, Namok was not inspired by the same minimalist mantra (Fig. 13 & 14). Namok stated that the content of her artwork was inspired by the Aboriginal country and people around her (NMWA 125). Despite their differences in content, it is undeniable that the Aboriginal art shares a resemblance with Western painting, even though Aboriginal artists like Namok have never seen images by Western artists.

Since artwork like Kngwarreye, Petyarre, and Namok's is deemed to be very Western-looking, some critics have questioned its authenticity as Aboriginal. These critics should not overlook the content of their painting, which is inspired by Aboriginal dreamings and not Western concepts. Dreamings are mythical stories and secrets about the Australian landscape and people. Dreamings are handed down by Aboriginal elders, and only artists from particular clans can paint certain designs, stories, and secrets (Beckett 87). As seen in the painting "Hungry Emus," Kngwarreye specifically says that she conceals the sacred dreamings in her artwork by painting impressionistically and thickly with a veil of dots over the content of her artwork (Fig. 15 & 16). As a result, artists like Kngwarreye have artfully used abstraction as a way of concealing sacred

information from non-Aboriginals. Thus, it is unwarranted to charge that women's Aboriginal art is not authentic simply because their aesthetic resembles Western painting, such as that of Jackson Pollack.

Furthermore, Aboriginal women artists like Kngwarreye should not be perceived as sell-outs who have abandoned Aboriginal traditions and materials. Instead, they should be recognized for creating artworks that are successful and unique negotiations of Aboriginal themes with Western materials. However, colonial attitudes assert that women artists should only incorporate Aboriginal influences in their artwork. Limiting them in this sense is no different than restricting them to creating only batik items in the 1980s. Like any artists, Aboriginal women should have the right to evolve stylistically and fuse different elements in their artwork.

Besides, experimenting with new colors and materials has brought Aboriginal women greater recognition, acclaim, and monetary success in today's art market. For instance, in 2005, the winners of the Telstra National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Art Awards all went to women artists. We can also measure the success of women Aboriginal artists by looking at auction sales. As recent as May of this year, a painting by Emily Kngwarreye was purchased by an Australian gallery for $1,056,000 dollars, breaking the million-dollar price barrier at a Sydney auction house (Bibby A-5, Fig. 17). Kngwarreye's painting is the highest selling artwork by an Australian woman. It appears that the hybridized style of women's Aboriginal art is only gaining more momentum in the art market today.

Despite record-breaking auction sales, art critics assert that women's Aboriginal art is not authentic because it is also too heavily influenced by Western patrons and dealers.

They say that non-Aboriginal patrons have too much control over what women's paintings look like, because in some cases, patrons dictate everything from the colors of the artwork to the design and size of the canvas. Obviously, Aboriginal artists respond to patrons' requests because patrons are providing the artists with income and art materials. But because some collectors are concerned with the authenticity of Aboriginal art, art centers have been established in Central and Northern Australia to ensure the legitimacy of the artwork. Employees at art centers verify the authenticity of Aboriginal art to collectors by taking pictures of the Aboriginal artist working on the painting and authorizing certificates of authenticity (Beckett 87, Fig. 18).

I assert that critics and collectors are adamant about ensuring the authenticity of women's Aboriginal art, because in many cases, Aboriginal art is purchased with the expectation that it is exotic and uniquely Indigenous. To the Westerner, Aboriginal artwork represents Aboriginal people, who are perceived as primitive and untouched by modernization. So, consumers buy Aboriginal art because they perceive it as something pure and totally disconnected from our nine-hour workday, money-obsessed culture. Consequently, when some consumers find out that woman's Aboriginal art is in some part influenced by Westerners, these works lose their Indigenous value and primitive purity.

These romanticized notions of Aboriginals only serve to keep them in the past as fictitious and innocuous Natives. Collectors who operate with these romanticized notions consider today's women Aboriginal artists as sell-outs who defy artistic traditions by painting more "Western-ly". Rather than being seen as sell-outs, these women should be recognized as contemporary, competent culture brokers who successfully negotiate

cultural influences in their artwork (Fig. 18). Therefore, by deconstructing romantic notions of Aboriginal art and people, we not only debunk prejudices, but we also level the playing field by critically looking at women's Aboriginal art as authentic, complex and contemporary as today's Western art.

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Map of Australia (Fig. 1)

Batiks on fabric from Ernabella School (Fig. 2)

Peter Marralwanga "The Snake man and a Woman" 1975 (Fig. 3)

Napangardi Sisters "Bush Banana Dreaming" 1992 (Fig. 4)

Michael Japangardi Poulson "Honey Ant Dreaming" (Fig. 5)

Ada Bird Petyarre "Aweyle for the Mountain Devil Lizard" 1994 (Fig. 6)

Emily Kngwarreye "Alhalkere Dreaming" 1996 (Fig. 7)

Mark Rothko "Untitled 1949 (Fig. 8)

Gloria Tamerre Petyarre "Untitled Leaves" 1995 (Fig. 9)

Vincent Van Gogh "The Fourteenth of July in Paris" 1887 (Fig. 10)

Rosella Namok "That Day: Painful Day" 2001 (Fig. 11)

Marcel Duchamp "Three Standard Stoppages" 1913-1914 (Fig. 12)

Rosella Namok "Para Way: Other Way" 2001 (Fig. 13)

Frank Stella "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" 1959 (Fig. 14)

Emily Kngwarreye "Hungry Emus" 1990 (Fig. 15)

Jackson Pollack "Convergence, Number 10" 1952 (Fig. 16)

Emily Kngwarreye "Earth's Creation" 1995 (Fig. 17)

Dorothy Napangardi Robinson "Bush Plum Dreaming" 1996 (Fig. 18)

Gabrielle Possum Ngwarreye "Seven Sisters" (Fig. 19)