

Portrait of the art dealer as the devil's advocate

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Art dealers, like band managers, are not usually portrayed as heroes in our culture. Their role is to promote original artistic expression, although often they are viewed as exploiting it.

As the title of this book indicates, Adrian Newstead, who has been a Sydney-based dealer in Aboriginal art for 40 years, is well aware of that negative stereotype. The reader may not have a warmer regard for art dealers after finishing this book, but it does offer a better understanding of how they operate.

Now semi-retired, Newstead looks back on a career that began in the 1970s with the discovery of Aboriginal painters in the remote desert, many of whom had had little contact with white Australia, and now includes today's younger urban-based multimedia practitioners.

Sadly, to a large extent, the story of Aboriginal art is a tale of exploitation. Very often, it seems, Aboriginal art has been placed on an altar - or rather, the auction block - not so much to inspire and be exalted in as to be sacrificed to greed and self-interest.

Traditionally, according to Newstead, Indigenous art was made purely for ceremonial purposes and to assist in communicating vital knowledge in a nomadic society that had no need for writing and no use for money.

Strictly speaking, any other use is exploitation, since sacred art, although it may be appreciated as decoration by Westerners, communicates nothing to anyone not initiated into the repository of secret understandings that for millennia have been passed on orally and visually from one generation to the next.

Newstead also makes the point that the making of traditional Aboriginal art does not conform to the individualistic concept of authorship as applied in Western art. He attacks what he sees as the media beat-up over "fake" Aboriginal art, pointing out that communal collaboration is normal.

In any case, he argues, if celebrity artists such as Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons can legitimately outsource the production of their work - to say nothing of an old master such as Rembrandt - why can't Aboriginal art be accepted on the same terms?

The way Newstead tells it, embarking on a career as an Aboriginal art dealer in the 1970s was an adventure. Politically, he is a Whitlamite who was on friendly terms with the late Al Grassby and an admirer of influential federal bureaucrat H.C. "Nugget" Coombs.

Newstead evidently has little time for today's politicians and bureaucrats, although he seems to respect Noel Pearson's efforts to enable Indigenous Australians to take control of their own destiny.

Newstead writes that journalistic attempts to "expose" the supposedly dodgy trade in Indigenous art have often caused more harm than good to the artists and their communities. He singles out what he views as naive and counterproductive interventions by writers such as Nicholas Rothwell and Germaine Greer.

Perhaps the most outspoken aspect of the book is where Newstead, who habitually quotes auction sale prices when discussing individual artists' work, queries the notion of art as a commodity. According to him, the one thing art dealers do not want their clients to know is that the "vast majority

of art actually loses value, in real terms, over time. Only a tiny proportion of art is a 'good investment'. Newstead, who appears to have made a good living from the promotion and sale of other people's creative work, strongly recommends only ever buying the art you like for the sole reason that you like it. Perhaps, in this sense, the dealer is not so much the devil as he is the devil's advocate.

Adrian Newstead will be at the Sydney Writers' Festival in Katoomba on May 19.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/portrait-of-the-art-dealer-as-the-devils-advocate-20140410-36e10.html>