

THE SATURDAY PAPER

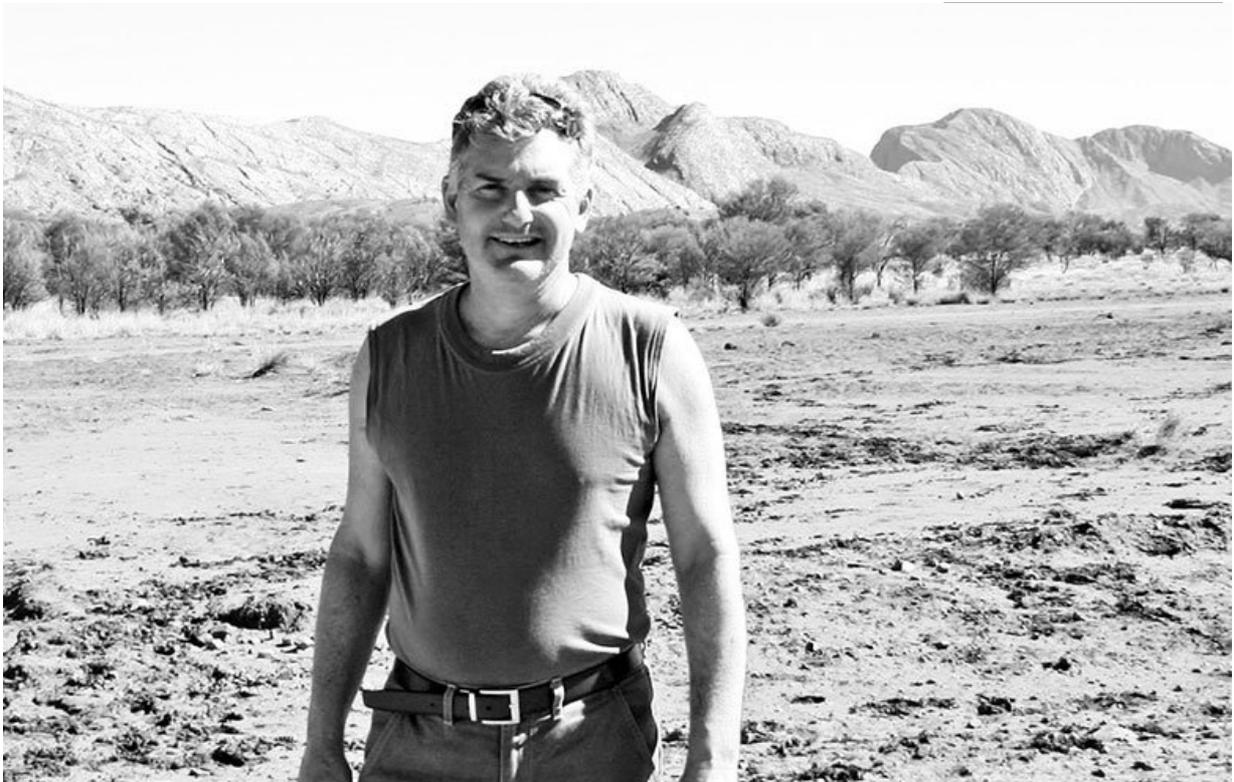
CULTURE
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Art dealer Adrian Newstead's remote control

He helped make Aboriginal art a boom industry. Meet Coo-ee gallery owner Adrian Newstead.



SUSAN CHENERY



Art dealer Adrian Newstead.

COURTESY COO-EE ABORIGINAL ART GALLERY

It would have been anathema to Queenie McKenzie, the place her painting ended up, amid high society, wide avenues and fastidious manners in Paris's obsessively chic 16th arrondissement. All she ever knew was the infinite horizon of the East Kimberley, and years spent driving cattle across the empty plains as a station cook. But here was her artwork, on the wall of an apartment with views across the Seine to the Eiffel Tower.

In this unfamiliar place, so far away, was something sacred: a story of dreaming handed down from mother to daughter, a mythology, the beloved country painted from inside out.

Queenie could not read or write. But she knew every rock, every hill, every ridge, every tree, every particle of her country. The distinctive dusty pink in the painting on that Paris wall came from ochre she had dug from the hills and mixed herself, the earth on which she stood.

On its way to France, that painting, like so many others, passed through the hands of the art dealer Adrian Newstead.

Newstead remembers visiting kind and affectionate Queenie in the shade of the verandah at her home at Turkey Creek in Western Australia, painting with her pots of ground earth.

"As always, she sat directly facing east, toward Old Texas Station and her Corella Dreaming site," he writes in his book *The Dealer Is the Devil: An Insider's History of the Aboriginal Art Trade*.

Eight years in the writing, and more than 30 years in the living, Newstead's opus is redolent with caked red earth – the dirt under fingernails, the ash from the campfire, the dust in the lungs – that he collected on his forays into the remotest parts of Australia to visit the artists in their communities. At 500 pages, his depth of knowledge and minutiae is detailed and definitive. This, alarmingly, was whittled down from the million words he originally wrote "to get it off my chest".

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The great privilege of entering a sacred world is, by definition, fraught with problems. And making money from the mystic would become increasingly complex and political as two cultures collided. Cultures so disparate that, Newstead admits, "there is no real conventional wisdom around it. It can be very difficult when you are dealing with people who have no sophisticated economic background."

And yet there were boom years for Aboriginal art, an unregulated free for all.

important. That we were helping Aboriginal people.” – Adrian Newstead

Newstead’s Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery at Bondi Beach exists in a newly minted parallel universe to the blasted landscape that is Utopia in Central Australia or the abandoned cars and road kill in the desert isolation of Wirrimanu that gave the world the celebrated Balgo Hills paintings.

The Coo-ee gallery, which opened in 1981, is billed as Australia’s oldest continuously operating Aboriginal art gallery. Not, in fact, so very old at all – considering the timeless culture it represents. But it was not until 1971, in the desert settlement of Papunya, that Aboriginal men encouraged by the school teacher Geoff Bardon began to paint their ancestral stories with acrylic paints on hard surfaces and boards – against a backdrop, Newstead notes in his book, of “ruthless repression”.

Long enough, though to make Newstead, 66, a repository of secrets and lore – and controversy. To the point where he is so consumed by it that interviewing him, if you can call it that, is like trying to hitch a ride on a runaway train. You are not encouraged at any time to interject with an actual question.

“The myths and legends that permeate Aboriginal paintings, ceremonies and rituals take a lifetime to accumulate,” he writes. “Aboriginal culture is as big as an onion the size of Uluru. You can peel off one layer, but profound insight is the preserve of people of high degree who have earned the right to that knowledge.”

'A moment in time'

Newstead grew up on a hill overlooking Sydney Harbour, in a big house full of food and laughter and artists. “I had a fortunate upbringing,” he writes.

He graduated from Sydney University as one of the first students to study climate change. While the contemporary Aboriginal art movement was being born in so much pain in Papunya, he was on the hippie trail across Asia, spending a year studying Buddhist meditation in India before being adopted into a Yemenite family on a kibbutz in Tel Aviv.

Returning to Sydney after four years, his applications for jobs in Third World countries were consistently rejected, so he started his own arts and crafts emporium. He began working directly with Aboriginal artists in 1982 after meeting Joe Croft, part of the “stolen generation” and the first Aboriginal person to attend university, and through him the environmentalist

Guboo Ted Thomas, who would inculcate the world of the spirit into him. “I ended up sitting around his campfire for an entire month every January for the full moon cycle in the state forest on the south coast of New South Wales.”

Ted Thomas and other elders “believed that the environmental movement will never really grow into itself and convert others to its cause unless it has a spiritual component. They believe very strongly that we have a spiritual connection to the land. People living in cities and shopping in supermarkets have no idea how the earth works and the environment works, how everything is dependent on each element. They don’t understand the environment as a spiritual entity. That is the belief of Aboriginal people.”

On his trips into the outback he met a generation that is now gone, who with no written culture were desperately painting their songlines, their ancestral stories and histories, for their children and grandchildren before they were lost forever. They were the last people to remember living in a nomadic state: leaving a legacy was about survival, levels of meaning that we will never understand and probably shouldn’t. Art became the new form of ceremony.

“I really believe what we have witnessed during the last 40 years has been one of the most transcendent chapters in the history of world art,” Newstead says. “A moment in time, a window when the last nomadic people in the world have found a way to record their stories and their country in a form that was never available to them prior to that time. They never had anything like a rectangular artefact in canvas and paint. There has been a massive outpouring. I see those old people as living treasures, people that have that knowledge intact like a 1000-year-old gum tree that is chopped down and as it is chopped down it makes a last desperate attempt to produce as much seed as it possibly can and scatter it as widely as it possibly can. Over the next 1000 years we will be able to reconstruct and reinterpret the songlines that crisscrossed the continent and see how interrelated and complex the culture of this country was.”

In 1980, Aboriginal art was little more than a cottage industry. By 1990, it was valued at \$40 million yearly.

“We didn’t see ourselves as breaking any new ground,” he writes. “In fact we didn’t catch the wave; it crashed over us.” Now, he says, “We believed sincerely we were doing something really, really important. That we were helping Aboriginal people to earn a living while still living in the communities and still living a consistent cultural way of life.”

Aboriginal artists were finding themselves feted on the world stage. Magnates and philanthropists were buying and curating collections that were being auctioned by Sotheby’s. The images of sacred stories had become a commodity.

“It has been like fire through the spinifex,” says Newstead, “moving very slowly in a long line from one end of the country to the other.” He writes: “It was not until I began selling paintings for more than \$10,000 at the beginning of the ’90s that I came to understand the dynamics of the art market. I learned that the art market is one of the least regulated and least transparent commercial activities in the world. It’s basically trade gussied up as cultural exchange, in which success relies on a cunning mix of showmanship and snobbery.”

In the meantime, “star” artists would be calling from a phone box in the Australian desert needing money for petrol or food. “It put terrible pressure on a lot of the artists,” says Robert Bleakley, who brought Sotheby’s to Australia and auctioned Aboriginal art. “They had an obligation to share everything with everyone in their clan.”

And then with the sudden and unexpected cascade of money came the accusations of exploitation, the carpetbaggers, the scandals of forgery with which Aboriginal art dealing is still tainted.

Paintings by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Emily Kame Kngwarreye were found to be painted by other members of their communities. Newstead counters that all the great European masters had studios full of assistants and students who finished their work, and collaboration is natural to people who live in intertwined communities. He was, at one time, embroiled in unarmed combat with various journalists, but insists, “I stand by every painting I sold.”

The politics from Canberra down are byzantine to the uninitiated.

In a bid to protect Aboriginal artists it was deemed that art centres in the communities should control their work. “There is an intermediary between the market and themselves, gatekeepers who prevent the dealers from having any bilateral one-on-one relationship with the people, which is a terrible thing in my opinion,” says a still-furious Newstead. “What Aboriginal people really want is relationships with the outside world on an equal footing.

“My experience overwhelmingly is that Aboriginal people are intelligent, they are capable of negotiating, they are incredibly pragmatic. People like to characterise the relationships as likely to be exploitative, but actually, if you read the history, there have been mutually beneficial and supportive relationships throughout the history of Aboriginal art.

“If you ask Aboriginal people why they paint, money is about the fifth thing on the list. Keeping culture alive, the pride they get from their interaction with white people after years of being dismissed and ignored or having nothing to offer, the opportunity to travel and have culture meetings across the country, and the positive effect it has on their children, as well as

earning money in communities that have no enterprise opportunity – these are all factors.”

Newstead believes that the “golden moment” for Aboriginal art has passed. “No art movement in the history of the world has lasted more than 20 or 30 years. Ninety-five per cent of the important paintings have already been produced. The fashionable Aboriginal art being produced now is urban stories from sedentary people. The tremendous meaning of ancient stories went with the generation who produced it. Are any of the new artists going to have the same level and depth of content as their forebears? I doubt it. They don’t have that knowledge. That is not to say it won’t be good. They are unbelievably talented artistic people, Aboriginal people.”

Robert Bleakley believes that the market got swamped with indifferent material as everyone jumped on the gravy train. “That coincided with the introduction of restriction of the ownership of artwork and superannuation funds and the GFC. The tailing off had begun before 2009, but it really accelerated it. There was so much crap out there that people became confused.”

But still there is a picture on a wall in Paris that was painted from the red earth the artist had spent a lifetime walking on. The museums of the world have the images of the dreaming of a dispossessed people. The voice from the wilderness may be faint sometimes, but it is heard. ●

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