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Entertainment

Art resale royalties an 'abject failure' for Indigenous artists

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Deconstructing myth: Adrian Newstead and Billy Benn at Bindi Art Centre in 2010.

The resale royalties scheme, introduced by the previous federal Labor government, has been labelled "an absolute, abject failure" by one of Australia's leading indigenous art dealers.

In *The Dealer Is the Devil*, Adrian Newstead writes that proponents of the resale royalty, which gives artists 5 per cent of the sale price each time their work is resold, claimed the scheme would address indigenous disadvantage.

However, he says, it has provided financial benefits for very few Aboriginal people and has created "another impediment to trade".

Billed as a history of the Aboriginal art market, Newstead's book will be launched by NSW Governor Marie Bashir at Australian Galleries in Paddington on Tuesday.

The director of Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery and a former managing director of Deutscher Menzies, Newstead further suggests the resale royalty is predicated on the false assumption that the majority of art increases in value.

"There is, however, a skeleton in the closet – one that galleries, for good reason, are loathe to raise with their clients," Newstead writes in the chapter "Reckon Silly Nation". "The vast majority of art actually loses value, in real terms, over time."

Newstead also describes the resale royalty as "yet another form of passive welfare".

"None of this money will ever go into community development or address Indigenous disadvantage," he said.

Instead of a payment to individuals, Newstead suggests a "tithe" on resold paintings could be paid to community art centres where Aboriginal artists in remote communities typically work, which would fund cultural activities and help aged and sick artists.

Newstead's book begins with the theft of his car in outback Western Australia by "petrol-sniffing teenagers" who also stole crates of limited edition prints that he was taking to the artists to be signed.

The Dealer Is the Devil provides a rollicking account of Newstead's encounters with indigenous communities and the transformation of Aboriginal artists such as Rover Thomas and Emily Kngwarreye into "elite brands".

Newstead claims Western art concepts such as authenticity and ownership sit uneasily in Aboriginal art.

"[T]he marketplace has the power to insist that thousands of Australian artworks, created and exchanged through relationships with Aboriginal people . . . are not authentic," he writes. "They have been marginalised, systematically discredited and devalued."

Newstead says the title reflects the popular notion that dealers rip off Aboriginal artists: "In a way the title is ironic. The book deconstructs the myth."

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