

Artlink

SPECIAL
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COMMUNITY
ART

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- Yes, but what IS Community Art?
a strategy for social reform?
 - a way of life?
 - a political movement?
- a victory for the margins?
 - a type of social welfare?
- a radical challenge to the art institution?
 - a model for a new culture?



Excellence is often used as an amorphous, undefined concept, the nature and value of which is assumed to be unquestionable, obvious and inherent to some things. It can be used as a standard which is only achievable by a few, leaving the rest failures. Some views of excellence can work in insidious and discriminatory ways to prop up notions of superiority relating to race, sexuality, genetics, religion, age and other factors.

Towards the "Yapa Way"

Barbara Pitman

Much arts activity in Aboriginal communities revolves around, and is driven by the forces of the international art market.

Each year, thousands of paintings and sculptures leave these communities destined for the walls of private homes, international and national collections and the burgeoning commercial gallery circuit.

Increasingly, Aboriginal communities and their artists are looking towards art and craft as a means of earning income, and establishing a place for Aboriginal art in the competitive contemporary market place.

Because of the acquisitive nature of this market-driven activity much of the work produced leaves the community forever. Unless Aboriginal communities have the luxury of a small museum or keeping house, there is no way in which they can store examples of the work produced. This in turn means that there is no visible accessible record of the artists skill and achievement, in the community where it was developed and which inspired its original conception.

In one such community, a small quiet revolution is taking place. The people involved are attempting to find a balance. They are involved, not only in producing a saleable product, but also in the process of community and cultural development.

The community is Lajamanu.

Lajamanu is a community of approximately 650 Aboriginal people and 40 non-Aboriginal people. It is located 670km south of Darwin and 180 km east of the Western Australian border. In Northern Territory terms it is very much 'in the bush', the nearest service town, Katherine, being a distance of 645 km away by road. The Aboriginal people of Lajamanu refer to themselves as Warlpiri. Together with the several thousand Warlpiri living in other parts of Central Australia they constitute one of the largest Aboriginal groups in Australia still living a tribal lifestyle.

While the hunting and gathering economy of the Warlpiri has been destroyed, many traditional patterns are still largely intact.

There is much concern, particularly among the old people of Lajamanu that their traditional law and beliefs (The Yapa way), is being lost through the invasion of a white culture, and its influence on the younger generations. The Yapa

way is this community.

During 1989, funding from the Northern Territory Government's Office of the Arts and the Community Cultural Development Unit of the Australia Council, enabled a small group of artists to work at Lajamanu with the members of its community.

The project incorporated writing, theatre, dance and visual art.

Amongst this group of artists was Tim Newth, a multi-media artist/performer.

It is his personal experience as an Artist in Community which informs this article. It illustrates the particular nature of working in geographically isolated Aboriginal communities. Here, cultural practices are so different to those on which our community arts practice has been based, that the most experienced community facilitator/artist needs to rethink much of what we have taken for granted over the years as being sound process and practice.

The act of teaching a young Aboriginal man to use a sewing machine, not to create a piece of art, but to repair his split jeans, may mean the difference between accessing the younger generations of the community or spending precious time on more conventional and less appropriate methods of communication.

Accepting that fabric designs may well result in kitchen curtains before the evolution of banners and murals is the first step in accepting a process which relies on the community's understanding of 'things happening at the right time'.

Diary Extracts Tim NewthArtist in Community

"Week one has come to a sudden stop. It's pretty scary. The whole community seems to be howling. I gather someone has died. This has been going on for the past hour and I can now see some women painted up. It's the middle of the day but may be the end, as far as any more work.

Getting the right design has got me around a lot of people. Everybody wanted something different but I finally found, or was pointed to, a dreaming which belongs here.

All the painted women are walking across the oval, the rest of the community seems to be following, or looking.

The sound is amazing.

A young man has been killed in a car crash.

Myself and two men drew up the mural, and a group of women who just appeared out of nowhere, as we finished the drawing, have become the core mural team. The owner of the design, came down and made

sure a few finer points were right.

Last night he 'sung' me the design.

It is this Warlpiri culture that I wish to understand. How art is a part of their lives in all its forms, but at what stage does it become important.

I'm really interested in people my own age, because it seems to be at this time that there is some shift from living life for cars and drink, to beginning to paint and live for their culture.

The timing of being here is important too because this has not traditionally been Warlpiri land. But there is a shift, because young people have been born here, and now their dreaming comes from here.

I asked why there were no public murals. I was told that this was because it is not Warlpiri land.

But is the land of the younger generations.

Week two. I've started to talk to people about art co-ops.

It's a subject that comes up more and more.

The sewing machines have been set up in the house. There are now five senior kids who come, thread up the machines and use them.

One is going to make a banner.

But one has to learn her dreaming yet.

I will use the fabric that you send to put banners in the Literacy Centre and the Pre School.

Week three. Mural two begins with talking to one woman, an older woman. Next morning she is there with another woman, and two old men. They talk for a long time deciding what dreamings should be used, as this mural is more a storyboard for the young kids. It will be in their area. I'm told that all the painting so far belongs to Jampijinpa /Nampijinpa & Jangala/Nangala. This allows me to paint.

These women are much older and from the top camp. They spend much time drawing things in the sand and explaining before we begin.

The mural women took me hunting on the weekend.

Week four. Mural three on the small water tank beside Wulain came out of the old men standing around watching the women paint, making sure they got it right. One old man gave me dreamings to paint with the women on their wall, but also asked "what about the men?"

On Wednesday morning there was much talk, followed by me being asked if I had a car. One man took me that morning to see trees, tracks and water holes. This is where the young people who are born here, belong. Their dreaming places.

The old man wanted only me to paint. A young Yapa man and myself did not see this as being right.

In the end the old Jangala decided he and I should paint. That's what's happening and although I don't know what it means in a world context, this painting experience is one of the most rewarding.

Each brush stroke contains many layers of meanings.

The men and women do tend to stand around hassling about the colours, or what bit can or can't go next to some other bit.

I don't often know what is going on, or what is being said. I live by the golden rule, 'when the time is right you will be told'. Everything is OK.

I love it when the designs are 'sung' as the men drew.

Week five. Mural three is still just the two of us,

which is wonderful. Equal time is spent out in the bush looking at dreaming sites. The old Jangala has brought in two other people, not to paint, but to instruct in how to paint two of the dreamings. These two, as well as the dreaming on the tank, belong to this area. There is still much talk by the larger group of men before a new dreaming is painted.

Week six. Two older women started this week, it was the first time that one of them had seen a sewing machine, let alone used one.

The Wulaign mural is still progressing. Often we will work solidly for a day or two on one section or dreaming, to be asked by Jangala a few days later to paint it out. The most recent 'painting out' was done not because the dreaming was wrong, but because of its relationship to the dreaming next to it. I don't believe Jangala has used a brush much before. He now paints things freehand and with much confidence.

Week seven. The concept of community arts, here, in this community seems such a white concept sometimes.

Strong winds all week.

Much dust.

Only one day's mural painting.

Painted the pama dreaming, pama being the flying ant on which we based the making of the big puppet.

Mural three continues.

Banners have been made with three older women.

They have much more knowing than the young.

We have all started a second banner.

Week eight. The wind has stopped blowing for one day, so now the mural is complete. Two of the older women have shown me their drawings from Bible Study using traditional designs.

They thought they would make a good mural. I have been following this up with the people from the church.

I work at the school each morning. One of the classes is putting together a play using large scale puppets which they are constructing out of bamboo and paper.

We finally made nineteen banners.

My last weekend was spent giving time to people who had given me time.

This meant things like a morning at an outstation watching the old man who had painted the last mural, paint his own canvas.

Taking up the hem of a pair of jeans.

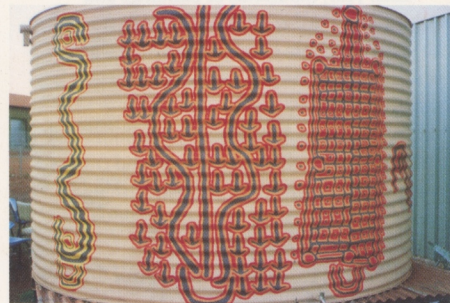
Finishing off some Aboriginal flag pillow cases.

They say that what I am doing here is important. Linking young kids, in a small way, back to their culture. The kids now come into my place and copy the dreamings off the wall. They all ask, 'what does it mean'. They ask me if the dreaming is mine.

I have been asked to go to the next men's 'business' camp. I would give anything to go because this is where all the men's information is passed on. Unlike the women, who do a lot of their 'business' in the community, the men do their 'business' in special areas outside the community.

I am now a much better card player, can spit better, and swear with much more confidence".

And this is also part of the Yapa way. □



Work done during the residency of Tim Newth, 1990. Above: members of the Lajamanu community executing three murals
Oposite: details of banners designed and executed by people of Lajamanu.

What's Wrong With the Lounge Room?
Com... and Public TV

