

National Cultural Policy Submission

Aboriginal Contemporary

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

As the owner of an Aboriginal art gallery in Sydney and a board member of the Indigenous Art Code, I enthusiastically welcome the revival of a National Cultural Policy with the goal of recognising and respecting the place First Nations' stories hold at the centre of Australian arts and culture.

Having owned my gallery for 13 years, working almost exclusively with primary market art from remote communities, I am well aware of the many internal operational and ethical challenges our industry faces. Doubtless in this submission process much will be written about these areas by people better qualified than myself to do so. There is much still to do but at the same time. I urge recognition that progress is being made.

In my submission, I would like to turn the spotlight on an area I believe is as crucial as it is overlooked: understanding and educating the end customer – the people who buy first nations art from art centres, galleries or online. The people who display it in their homes or offices; talk about it with their friends and families and who are the source of the revenue that ultimately flows back to help and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Our industry rightly spends a lot of time looking inwards but to my mind not nearly enough looking outwards. Understanding not only those who do buy First Nations' art – What's important to them? Why do they buy what they do? But also those who *don't* buy our art – Why not? What are the barriers? What role do ethical concerns play?

I have my own theories but they are just that: theories. To the best of my knowledge, no one has done the work to truly understand First Nations' art customers and, perhaps more importantly, potential customers. No one has unpacked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market in the way professional marketers unpack banking, consumer electronics or supermarkets.

Our industry needs a robust market segmentation model built on evidence-based research at scale. From this we need a coordinated, properly funded and sustainable communications strategy to educate and inform both buyers and potential buyers in the areas most important to them.

Building confidence and trust that artists are treated and paid fairly and ethical practices prevail at every stage of the supply chain is sure to be a part of this. On a daily basis I am exposed to how important these things are to my customers in Sydney. They seek reassurance. They lack trust and confidence. And for many it can make or break their decision whether or not to buy.

A few years ago, the Indigenous Art Code's 'Fake Art Harms Culture' campaign demonstrated how professional communications could support advocacy to regulate cultural appropriation in tourist art. But it was tiny – a few posters, leaflets and some social media posts. There may be benefit in executing this or a similar campaign at scale. But we don't know. If we want First Nations' art to be at the centre of Australian culture and to be on the national agenda and every Australian's radar, we need to be educating and informing the general population, not just our own industry bubble.

Personally, I am convinced that our industry has the potential to be more than twice its current size by improving rather than compromising its ethical practices and communicating this effectively to buyers and potential buyers. The outcome would not only be greater revenue for artists and communities, but a greater national understanding of First Nations' Country, culture and arts.

With a new government with a renewed focus on culture and the arts fueled by positive conversations around the upcoming referendum, the stage is perfectly set to make twenty years progress in the next two. Please, let's not miss the moment.