

KIMBERLEY ART : ASSERTION AND RESPONSE

Speaker: John Stanton

On 5 November 2008, John Stanton, who is the Director of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, spoke to the Kimberley Society about contemporary Aboriginal art. John has worked in the Kimberley on and off since the early 1980s, after arriving there by a rather circuitous route. He came from New Zealand at the age of twenty-three to do a doctorate with a focus on Mt Margaret Mission in the north-eastern part of Western Australia's goldfields. Social change was his main interest, both in N.Z. and after arriving in W.A.

John's take on socio-cultural change is that, while it features in all societies at all times, the catalysts for the change and the media through which they take place vary widely. Society is the perpetuation of knowledge, art and other practices, and, in that context, art can be seen as a material manifestation of society and culture. In his talk, John presented numerous images of Aboriginal art from the Kimberley and he explained how it has changed in response to outside influences.

Enormous changes have occurred both in Aboriginal Australians and in other Australians. Contemporary art provides scope for analysing some of that change and how people have coped with it.

The Kimberley is a diverse sub-continent with many different cultures and languages. The Aboriginal people did not need to read or write; they relied on their memories and passed knowledge from one generation to the next by telling stories, singing, dancing, and painting. Other early peoples had the same approach and it is only comparatively recently that civilisations have come to be marked by literacy.

Custodianship of country is a dominant theme in Aboriginal art and much of the art re-creates a mythological event or sequences of such events. By depicting those events, the artist demonstrates his or her rights over the places associated with the events. That tradition remains strong and it has embraced changes such as those brought by engagement with tourism and native title.

Some art incorporates elements of contact with other cultures. One of the earliest outside influences was the presence of Maccassan fishermen who sought trepang on the northern Australian coast. No one knows when those visits commenced but the Asia trepangers came decades before the first non-Indigenous people tried to establish themselves in the Kimberley. The Indigenous people accommodated the trepangers, though not without some conflict, and they incorporated elements of the contact in their art, songs and dance. In later years, the same process saw the incorporation of elements of encounters with mariners, pearlers and other outsiders on the coast. The rock art on Bigge Island provides one example of this influence where a painting shows a boat containing figures that appear to be smoking pipes.

Away from the coast, the introduction and spread of the pastoral industry disrupted Aboriginal people's lives and influenced their cultural practices. In

looking at the resulting art, dance and story telling, non-Indigenous people often fail to listen well enough, or to learn enough, to grasp the meaning of what they are seeing. Men dressed as bullocks, for example, “become” what they are.

Both on the coast and inland, containment policies affected Indigenous people’s scope for remaining on their country and fulfilling their cultural obligations. Some people went to the missions willingly, coming and going as they pleased, but others had their movements curtailed. The cattle station run by the government at Moola Bulla was a reserve intended to stop the traditional people annoying the pastoralists who had taken their land.

One impact of the depopulation and dislocation resulting from colonisation was the movement of people from the northern parts of the Western Desert into the southern parts of the Kimberley. That large-scale movement contributed to desert art being produced at pastoral centres such as Fitzroy Crossing and Warmun (Turkey Creek). While living far away, people from southern localities used their painting both as a statement of continuing custodianship of their country and as a means of passing on knowledge. A similar effect saw maritime traditions spreading inland, and that resulted in the Wandjina becoming one of the best known images in Kimberley art.

In discussing the emergence of commercial art processes, John talked about art production and what it means, and about discrepancies between intent and use. He touched on traditional art versus tourist art, and declared that tourist art was not a bad thing. It provided local income for artists and paved the way for them to transform their work into the canvases and other media that art galleries wanted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The *balga* or ‘everyday dance’ also saw pieces of wooden board become collectors’ items after artistic works were painted onto them for non-secret ceremonies.

With a large part of the audience having a strong interest in Aboriginal art and culture, and with some of the Kimberley Society members also being serious collectors of art, John’s talk was very well received. As with many of our speakers, it was clear that we were listening to someone with an excellent grasp of his subject.

Daphne Edinger and Cathie Clement

Further reading

Stanton, John E. *painting the country : Contemporary Aboriginal art from the Kimberley region, Western Australia*. UWA Press (Nedlands), 1989.