

Chapter 5. "Art an' Culture: the Two Main Things, Right?"

Art and culture: the two main things right? Because you get any visitor what come along...they interested in Aboriginal culture, they interested in art, right? ~ Badger Bates, Wilcannian Aboriginal artist.

This chapter explicates some of the ways in which Aboriginality and Aboriginal identity are expressed and made manifest through the lenses of 'art' and 'culture', as these categories are drawn upon and defined by some Aboriginal people of Wilcannia. I start from the premise that artists in Wilcannia currently produce what they call art; they 'have' art. One of my reasons for taking art as a point of exploration is the way in which 'Aboriginal people' (as a discursive category) have become increasingly indexed by the products of art (Merlan 2001 & 1994:681). That is, the works themselves have come to stand for – to index – the presence of Aboriginal culture. This assumption is explored in relation to the making of art in Wilcannia, together with the broader white perceptions of Wilcannia's lack of culture. What 'art' and 'culture' mean and are made to mean are vehicles for understanding social processes and interactions, their meanings and values more broadly. Art works and artists are of particular interest in light of the dynamics of Wilcannia for the way forms of difference become problematic.

Over the past four decades and increasingly over the last two, the category of 'Aboriginal art' has become a vehicle through which 'Aboriginal culture' (writ large) has gained certain kinds of viability and value. Aboriginal art has become a "socio-political project" of many agencies of the Australian state and has figured as a means of offering a positive "reevaluation of indigeneity" (Merlan 2001:202) for both Aboriginal people and in the eyes of the wider Australian public. Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture as intersecting tropes have also figured in the creation of a particular nationalism which seeks to vicariously draw upon what is perceived to be Aboriginal people's spiritual wholeness and deep connection to a sentient landscape. These are attributes which are variously considered to be lost to "Western art," 'Western man,' or to 'modernity'" (see also Lattas 2000; McClancy 1997; Merlan 2001; Myers 2004).

Some, most notably Fry and Willis (1989), argue that Aboriginal art and Aboriginal involvement in the art world offers no agential basis for a self-identifying Aboriginal culture. They state that the production of Aboriginal art is primarily "for the gaze of the colonizer

and on terms and conditions set by the dominant culture” (1989:160). Others such as Morphy (1995) give greater agency to Aboriginal people, and trace the journey of Aboriginal cultural production “from ‘ethnographic object’ to ‘primitive fine art’, to ‘fine’ and ‘contemporary art’ (cited in Merlan 2001:205).

It is difficult to deny the assertion that Aboriginal involvement in dominant society ‘art worlds’ has for the most part been filtered and relayed through dominant culture lenses and expressions. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people have drawn upon art and its connection to culture in complex ways. Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have their own ‘take’ on the ways in which art can be (and is being) used as a form of self-production and self representation of culture. Thus, to focus exclusively on the powers of non-Aboriginal culture is to deny the agency that Aboriginal people assert over their art, its production, and the forms of that production: it is to assert that Other battles and interpretations retain their hold.

In talking back to some of the dominant culture assumptions and perceptions about Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture, I discuss some of the art works of Wilcannia as I understand them and as these were explicitly discussed by the artists. I present and re-present some Aboriginal expressions of what ‘art’ and ‘art making’ *means* and *does* according to different artists in town, as well as art’s expressed relationship with ‘culture’.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia say that they have both Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal art, although their assertions often do not mesh with the ways these concepts are considered by whites in Wilcannia, by ‘art worlds’ and in discourses of the wider Australian public. This is importantly and precisely the point. Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture are (taken separately and together) concepts of much inter and intra-cultural diversity of meaning and making.

Artist is Not Who or What I Am

Before going on to discuss what art and culture mean to various Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, it is important to prefigure the way in which those who create art objects, i.e. artists, are considered in Wilcannia as opposed to dominant society. It seems that being an artist in dominant culture terms is not so much to do with actual time spent on artistic creation (although this is one consideration) as it is with identifying and defining oneself and (more importantly some might say) being identified and defined as an artist. It is in some ways a mantle taken up by the individual, as well as being conferred.

Conversely, if someone is Aboriginal and picks up a paintbrush either to a greater or lesser degree, they are, for the most part, automatically considered by those with links to dominant culture art organisations, including curators around the Far West region, to be an artist. People in Wilcannia are drawn into the Aboriginal art ‘game’ of dominant culture without necessarily endorsing what this implies. As with the previously discussed concepts of ‘success’ and ‘opportunity’, dominant society notions of what an artist is and the in-built expectations this creates are often at variance with Aboriginal concepts.

For most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia that I spent time with, the term artist is less to do with defining who or what a person is and more of an indication of certain activities that some people undertake (some to a greater or lesser extent than others). Most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia do not refer in general to people in the community who undertake activities such as painting and carving as artists in terms of this being a primary identifier or role, despite the fact that for some art making is a more or less daily activity. This is not to say that the people who create art works do not identify and are not at times recognised as being artists: for example, at art exhibitions, art galleries and the like, and where the central purpose of an event or discussion is art and/or artists. In these contexts the person or persons who have created the art works on display are seen and are referred to as “artists”, more specifically “Indigenous artists” and “Aboriginal artists”. Indeed, the presence of an art work within an art gallery or other art world context generally supposes as a matter of course that the creator of the work is an artist. Whilst Aboriginal people to some extent expect and recognise that this will be the case, outside of these contexts the acceptance, expectation and recognition of this title by both the artists themselves and the majority of Aboriginal people within Wilcannia is quite differently configured.

When I first went to Wilcannia I asked a few of the Aboriginal people I met if there were any artists in town, the response varied. Some adults appeared puzzled by the question. One child of about ten years of age asked, “what that is?” I would then stumble out something like, “you know, do painting an’ that”. Mostly the response was along the lines of, “Uncle Willie does painting”, or “Watty carves bowls, boomerangs an’ that there”.⁸⁸ At times when in art world-related contexts and situations and/or when my interest in art and artists was

88 In Wilcannia, the terms Auntie and Uncle are used quite generally when a younger person is referring to an older person. Sometimes the lack of use of this kin term indicates a lack of respect for the older person. Peers more often seem to refer to each other as ‘cuz’, ‘cousin’, ‘Brother’, ‘Sister’ or ‘Bro’, ‘Sis’. This is the case when there is both a strong or weak ‘connection’ within the kin network. That is, Bro or Sis can indicate a close kin network affiliation or be used where there is more distant or no kin connection. In the latter circumstance, Bro and Sis can be used by one blackfella to another or when talking to whitefellas.

known to the person or people I was talking to, people might say that Uncle X or Cousin Y is “a great artist”. This was usually followed up with a statement or question about a particular art work created by the individual. For example, Uncle Willie is a “great artist”, “Have you seen his snake paintin’?”, or “have you seen Uncle Badger’s boat? It’s deadly” or “it’s neat, ay”. These are references to art works, to people and to relations. Although someone may be said to be a “great artist”, this is quite differently connoted to being an artist in the sense of this being a primary role or identity.

In Wilcannia, when someone paints, carves or sculpts, they are not considered as undertaking a special class of ‘work’, activity or occupation. In many ways the artist is no different to the person who drives a truck for the local Shire or pours concrete for the local CDEP. Indeed, some people in the community “do art” as a CDEP initiative. I saw little evidence of the notion of the artist as having a special position in society purely by virtue of this kind of production. While Uncle Willie Don may paint, and Uncle Badger carves and makes things with steel, they are more readily known as X’s Poppa, son of Y, cousin to ABCD: they are family who sometimes paint and sometimes fish and sometimes do lots of other things besides. For this reason I italicise the term *artist* throughout the remainder of this thesis in relation to the *artists* that I worked with in Wilcannia: as a means of what I feel is a necessary differentiation from the way in which the role of artist is considered in dominant society.

This is not to say that some *artists*, particularly those who have attained some degree of recognition in broader art world contexts, are unaware of the special status accorded ‘artists’ in these contexts. Nor is it to say that the creation and value of art works goes unnoticed; quite the contrary. The importance and value given to art works, economically, socially, politically and culturally is recognised by both the *artists* and the broader community. Indeed, individual as well as group ‘pride’ and ‘respect’ are often heavily vested in the execution and content of the art works.⁸⁹ Moreover, the art works of *certain* people gain a special recognition by virtue of the creator’s assumed knowledge of culture, their authority and the respect in which they are held. As chapters six and seven show, a great deal of the attention and respect given to certain art works is strongly related to the person who made them. The creating of art work, the respect and authority of the person making the work, the

89 See chapters six and seven for fuller discussion.

content, the degree to which one's work sells and the price for which it sells all operate at different levels and accrue different kinds of value.

Art works seem to stand as ambiguously placed entities which can mediate and navigate a precarious envy/respect divide for *certain artists* in ways not permitted others as stand-alone agents. There is also clearly some differentiation between those *artists* who are seen to be culturally knowledgeable and culturally authoritative and those who are not recognised as such. In what is reminiscent of Gell's (1998) proposal for a theory of an anthropology of art (see appendix three for overview), the art works might be considered to index the agency of the *artist*. This is not to say that the art work does this by itself, but that the art work is an index of the person as part of a network and variety of relations and is in some ways viewed as an extension of the *artist* (Gell 1998:4; Thomas 2001). The idea of art works indexing the agency and personhood of others is more fully explored later in this chapter and in chapter six. The general recognition of art as a valued tool of teaching culture, as well as its ability to represent culture must also be considered in terms of its role in mediating between cultural values, the value of culture and the value of the *artist*.

'Signs' and 'Practices' of Art in Wilcannia – Past and Present

Around 1987 an Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre began to operate in Reid Street in what was previously the old fun parlour. This centre, funded by the Local Land Council and DEETYA and run by the local Land Council, was known locally as the "*Kaathiri*" (boomerang) art centre⁹⁰ until it closed (according to the best estimates of people in town) around 1991. It is difficult to trace what happened to the centre as all records associated with it were lost in a fire (or as one white local put it, "they were torched"). There were about five people associated with the running of this centre, and many more who simply came to 'work' there (Image 20).⁹¹

90 Some of the art work made at *Kaathiri* included carved shields, boomerangs, spears and coasters made out of mulga wood, bowls made of red gum, bark paintings made with river red bark with maybe a "little blackfella" or "welcome to Wilcannia" painted on them, didgeridoos out of mallee wood and *bundis* (womens' digging sticks). Poker work was a popular design tool. Painted quandong, kurrajongs and acacia seeds and "porcupine" quills were used to make necklaces, earrings and trinkets. Acrylic painting on canvas board and masonite was also done.

91 The centre produced wooden artifacts such as didgeridoos, boomerangs, *bundis* (women's digging sticks), acrylic paintings on canvas, canvas board and masonite, necklaces and earrings made with beads and seeds including quandong, and acacia seeds, and echidna quills. The wooden artifacts were also painted with designs of animals and other scenes.

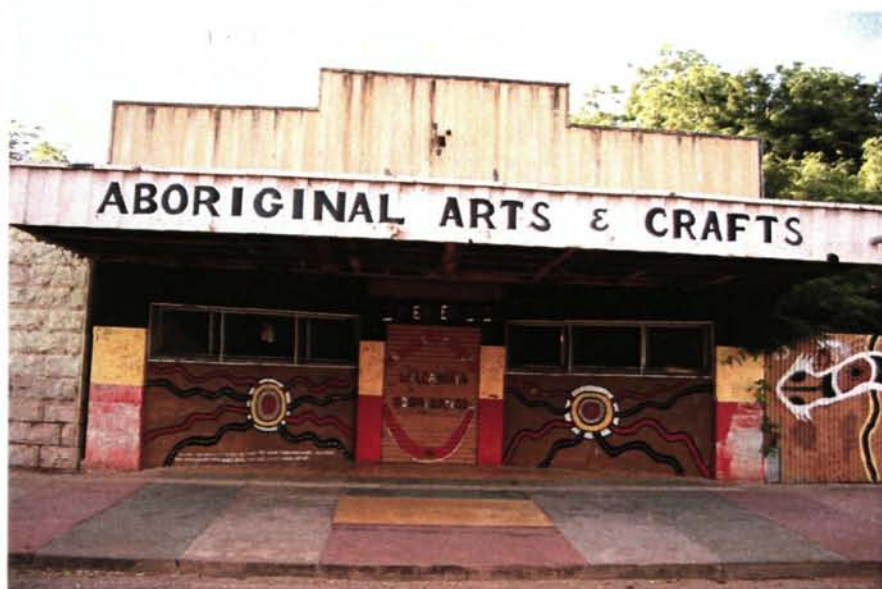


Image 20. The now closed Kaathiri Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre, Reid Street Wilcannia.

Following *Kaathiri*⁹² and after a period of about six years, the Local CDEP known as *Ngarpa* (“working together”) opened the *Parntu* (fish, cod) Art Centre. Townsfolk estimate a starting date of around 1995. According to current CDEP administrators *Parntu* was funded by The Department of Education Employment Training and Youth affairs (DEETYA) under a Work Australia or job skills programme. The space where this centre stood is the previously referenced old Mobil site – “The Mobil”. Unlike *Kaathiri*, *Ngarpa* was not purely an art and craft centre. The centre employed a non-Aboriginal horticulturalist who encouraged the creation of a permaculture garden which included fruit trees, vegetables, ducks and geese. There is a sense that this was intended to be a more holistic cultural endeavour. Notions of Aboriginal community, a mythical ‘*gemeinschaft*’ of co-operation and the much promulgated ‘caring and sharing’ ethic appear to have underwritten this and other non-Aboriginal ventures for the ‘Aboriginal community’. This centre closed around 1997 but, again, the exact dates are not clear as the records of this centre have also been ‘lost’(Image 21).⁹³

92 Reasons for the close of *Kaathiri* centre vary. Most of the Aboriginal people asked said that they did not really know what happened, although some reasons given were: the centre just “ran out of money”, there was too much in-fighting (“tribal fighting”), or people not looking after the brushes and wasting paints. Another reason given was that “everytime they got a stockpile of art together to sell, the kids broke in and vandalised the place and people just said stuff it”. Others, mostly whitefellas, gave reasons such as poor administration, ‘interclan rivalry’, “poor stock control and ordering”, together with certain people “creaming off the profits”.

93 At the time of writing there are no communal art facilities, although one is in the works. This has been instigated primarily by Paul Brown, the owner of The Wilcannia Motel, and Karen Donaldson, a local white



Image 21. Painted sign for Parntu (cod) art centre by Karen Riley. The sign still sits at the now demolished old Mobil site.

I had been living in town for almost a month, when I found out that the owner of 'The Wilcannia Motel' sold art produced by local Aboriginal people⁹⁴ The owner of 'The Wilcannia Motel' came to Wilcannia in 2002. This man is committed to "furthering interest in art in Wilcannia". To this end he now provides acrylic paints and canvases to Aboriginal people who wish to paint. He then purchases those completed works that he is interested in and which the *artists* are willing to sell. Some of these he keeps for himself and others he sells (at little or no profit) to clients of the motel and other members of the public such as the transient white workforce.

As at 2005, Wilcannia town has one small art gallery – 'The Old Fuel Store'.⁹⁵ This gallery displays (for the most part) the work of the resident non-Aboriginal owner and artist, and opens once a week on a Thursday for about four hours. The gallery also displays three older

artist and owner of 'The old Fuel Store' art gallery. These two people are also involved in assisting with the negotiations for government funding for the facility.

94 I found out about this art from one of the nurses. She had been asking around about Aboriginal art and wanted to buy some as presents for family and friends before she cut short her working contract and left town.

95 Although *Thankakali* 200 kilometres away in Broken Hill allows "outsiders" (those not from Broken Hill) to exhibit, few *artists* from Wilcannia choose to do so. One reason is that the art is not pre-purchased by *Thankakali* and then sold on, therefore, the *artist* must wait until their work has been sold before being paid. Moreover, *Thankakali* take a percentage of the sale price for tax and other on-costs. Most *artists* rail at this and say that they are being "ripped off". Further, many *artists* in Wilcannia would not ask *Thankakali* to show their work, as this might assume a level of relationship which may not be present and/or invoke some unwanted obligation. Inter-town differences including competition between families associated with *Thankakali* is another factor.

lino prints by local Aboriginal people: the result of a lino cut and printing class run in Wilcannia by TAFE in the early nineties.

Prior to the introduction of Government funding for the 'arts' in Wilcannia (from the late eighties onwards) there is little physical evidence of there having been any painters in Wilcannia. A few examples of acrylic paintings estimated to be from the late seventies and early eighties⁹⁶ are stacked against the walls of a privately owned and disused building which was at that time a public house. An adjoining residence owned by the same man has some acrylic paintings and carved boomerangs displayed on the walls. In total there are about a dozen or so (acrylic and gloss house paint) paintings on masonite, plywood and canvas boards. The owner of these premises, who still lives in town, said that he traded the art with the *artists* in return for alcohol or cash (Image 22 and Image 23).



Image 22. Painting, (gloss paint on plywood) stacked against wall in old public house/hotel.

96 Some of these works are undated and unsigned, therefore I am relying on best estimates from people in town as to the date of many of the works. Some show dates in the early eighties. Some of these works are interesting for their obvious use of 'dotting' as background.



Image 23. Painting (acrylic on board) in old public house/hotel.

When I asked some of the older Aboriginal people whether they remembered any of the ‘old people’ carving before the art centres opened, many went on to talk of an Uncle or another (mostly male) relative who had carved wooden artifacts for sale. Aboriginal people told me that items (now re-cast as ‘art works’) such as “feather flowers”, carved boomerangs, *nulla nullas* (clubs), spears, shields, stock whips, emu eggs, and jewellery made out of various nuts, seeds and mussel shells were made for sale as souvenirs and trinkets prior to the eighties.⁹⁷ Indeed, in the recollections and imagination of many Aboriginal people today these objects (other than feather flowers (Image 24) and stock whips), have been produced more or less continuously for as long as they can remember.



Image 24. Margaret (Miss Marg) Mitchell incorporates emu feathers into mobiles and hangings together with painted seed pods and beads. Hers was the only example of featherwork that I came across.

⁹⁷ Martin states that emu eggs were used as containers pre-contact although it is not known if they were carved as they are post-contact (Martin 1996:12).

When I asked the non-Aboriginal owner of The Old Fuel Store Gallery, who has lived in Wilcannia on and off for the last sixteen years, if she remembered any of the old people making art works she said she could not even remember any of “the old people” “whittling wood”. This is clearly contra the memories of some Aboriginal people.⁹⁸ The different recollections or Aboriginal people may speak in part to the socio-political importance and indeed at times the institutional necessity for Aboriginal people to demonstrate continuity with ‘tradition’ (Povinelli 2002:35-41). Brewster (1996:4) states that “Aboriginal people’s narrativisation of the past is always relative to their position in the present, and this relationship is in a constant state of flux as the present changes”. For Aboriginal people, there can be no argument that art has become a recognised vehicle for demonstrating continuity of practices and ‘traditions’.⁹⁹

People recognise that the production of acrylic paintings and other art forms such as metal work is a more recent phenomenon. They also recognise that wooden carvings, painted emu eggs, jewellery and stone carving have markedly increased in production as opposed to “before”. People nevertheless state that carved bowls, boomerangs, *nulla nullas*, spears, shields and emu eggs have always been made. Some objects such as carved and plaited leather stock whip handles¹⁰⁰ and feather flowers are no longer in evidence.

That non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia prior to the late eighties were not generally aware of the production and/or the sale of ‘art works’ might say something about the stringent physical and relational distance historically observed (indeed at times expected and demanded by whites) between black and white people in Wilcannia.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, in considering the discrepant notions regarding the presence of ‘art objects’ in Wilcannian

98 Although many of the objects are said to have been made for sale to whitefellas, some older as well as more recent works are held by families. I saw some carved emu eggs made in 1979 and a few carved wooden shields, boomerangs, spears and *nulla nullas* from the late seventies in family homes and on the wall of the local public house. Today, most homes in Wilcannia have art works made by relatives on display. Acrylic paintings, clapsticks, boomerangs and carved and painted emu eggs predominate. It is difficult to precisely date many of these objects.

99 The use of art in these contexts is most famously demonstrated by the Yolgnu people of Yirrkala in North East Arnhem land. Their bark petition in 1963 (which was in fact two petitions) showed the respective Yirritja and Dhuwa moities’ sacred designs which it was hoped would prove their relationship to their land and the Yolgnu Law in relation to this land (Saltwater 1999). The petitions were a response to the government excising Yolgnu land for a Swiss mining company against the wishes of the Yolgnu people.

100 The making of intricately carved whip handles is linked to the pastoral industry and the strong Aboriginal connection to it. There is a splendid example of a carved whip handle between the 1920’s and 1940’s made by Harry Mitchell, a Barkindji man, which is held in the Australian Museum in Sydney.

101 Beckett, talking about the interaction of black and white in the Far West in the 1950’s, said that, “Few whites show any interest in becoming involved in aboriginal affairs, and they are not always ready to allow aborigines to become involved in their own affairs” (2005b:33). The racial divide in Wilcannia and other NSW country towns is well documented (Cowlshaw 1988a, 2004a; Morris 1997; Morris and Cowlshaw 1990; Myers 1988; Wootten 1990).

Aboriginal communities prior to the 1970's, it is important to acknowledge the renaissance of Aboriginal interest in Aboriginal culture and identity from the 1970's onwards, as well as the growing role played by Aboriginal visual art in national and international representations of Australia. Physical and verbal evidence shows that some art works, then known as "artifacts", "souvenirs" and "trinkets" were being made in Wilcannia prior to the policies beginning in the 1970's which began to emphasise art and culture as intertwining aspects. However, despite Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discrepancies about the level and presence of this production, all agree it was not substantial, and that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have drawn upon Aboriginal art and culture discourses for their own purposes and ends.

Art as a Signifying Cultural Practice

Svasek states that "objects, as dynamic signifiers, can be incorporated into discourses which demarcate, define and reinforce specific identities" (cited in MacClancy 1997:27). This acknowledges and speaks to the singular as well as the more incorporative role that art works are drawn upon to perform. As MacClancy posits, people "...use art objects, for example, to resist colonialism, to subvert racism, to demolish demeaning stereotypes, to better their own position or that of their own group, to defend a challenged notion of their people's identity, to re-invent that identity" (1997:2). When art objects are brought together with discourse, art as culture can resonate synergistically to reinforce and strengthen individual and group identity.¹⁰²

Art objects are a part of Aboriginal "self-production" (Myers 1991:28). For many of the Aboriginal *artists* and indeed for others who do not make art in Wilcannia, art has become a mirror and avenue through which identity and culture are visually and discursively expressed, reflected upon and explored. They clearly recognise art's potentiality as an instrument of discursive advocacy, identity and agency (Gunew and Rizvi 1994; MacClancy 1997; Phillips and Steiner 1999). Moreover, the associated discourses "are neither invariant nor do they issue from a single arena. They are as numerous theorists of identity have argued, multiple and shifting" (Hall and du Gay 1996; Myers 1994:681).

It would be incorrect to say that the only or even the primary driver of all of the *artists* is a desire to 'prove' an Aboriginal identity or the possession of Aboriginal culture to other

102 Whilst I am talking here about the compounding effects of art works and associated discourse, I do not wish to suggest that art works do not have stand-alone *effects* and agency according to some *artists*. This is discussed in chapter seven.

Aboriginal people, to Others or to the self. Nevertheless, I suggest that the extent to which *artists* say that art works *show* culture and demonstrate culture in some way references a desire to indicate some tangible expression of this *thing* called Aboriginal culture in ways which both Aboriginal people and dominant society understand.

Here identity is seen to be re-produced, re-constructed and re-presented in an interactive process with and through both people and things. Art and culture and their importance become relational. That is, art and culture and how these categories are constructed and perceived are about relationships: relationships between people and relationships between people and things. The making of 'art' and 'culture' are, to use Myers term, "signifying practices" (2002:55). In this way, art objects and their creation together with their multiple imaginings *do* things, *make* things and *mean* things.

Howard Morphy (1994:655) considers that, "If the anthropology of art is to make a useful contribution, then it must be by virtue of a concept of art that is sufficiently open to allow the analysis of objects from other cultures on their own terms...". However, Morphy (1994), as with some other anthropologists of art (Coote 1996; Price 1989), is heavily concerned with delineating and arguing for a cross-cultural aesthetics. Whilst I do not dismiss the idea of a cross-cultural aesthetics, my concern is with what art objects *do* within a network of relations. I am interested in the motivations for their construction as well as the ways in which art objects as indexes of the *agency* of "*prototypes*", "*artists*" and "*recipients*" (Gell 1998)¹⁰³ operate to "motivate inferences, responses or interpretations" (Thomas 2001b:4). It is important to recognise that whilst the *artists'* presence and the *artists'* discourse about their work is important in the ways previously specified, some Aboriginal people believe that the art works themselves have an agency of their own as well as being subject to the agency of others. Gell's (1998) notion of art objects as agents having the ability to do service as persons is pertinent here, particularly as this pertains to Frazer's (1980) idea of 'imitative' or sympathetic magic whereby "the mutual resemblance of the image and the original [are] a conduit for mutual influence or agency" (Gell 1998:100).

103 Nicolas Thomas succinctly and elegantly summarises these relations well. "Prototypes are the things that indices may represent or stand for, such as the person depicted in a portrait – though things may be 'represented' non-mimetically, and non-visually. Recipients are those whom indexes are taken to effect, or who may, in some cases, be effective themselves via the index. (A view of a country estate commissioned by the landowner may be a vehicle of the recipient's self-celebrating agency, more than that of the *artist*. *Artists* are those who are considered to be immediately causally responsible for the existence and characteristics of index, but as we have just noted, they may be vehicles of the agency of others, not the self-subsistent, creative agents of Western commonsense ideas and art-world theory" (2001:4-5) (see also Appendix number three for more information on Gell's theory of art objects).

One *artist*, Phillip Bates, considers that others can obtain power over him and his family through access to their painted images; he is not alone in this thinking. Furthermore, if he were to paint the face – particularly the eyes – of “dreamin’ spirits” (also called *gunki* or ghosts), they may have some direct access to him, as the following conversation demonstrates.

Lorraine: I notice when you do figures, you do this sort of meshing over their faces. What does that sorta mean?

Phillip: Aaah been paintin’ them for some time now. You know I painted them once and then I was thinking, you know, what if I see they face an’ I don’t wanna see they face in my dreams, ya know. That’s why I put mesh over they face, I don’t wanna see ‘em. To me, they, ghosts, they real to me.

Lorraine: Right. So those spirits, those dreamin’ spirits there, have they got names or are they just dreamin’ spirits?

Phillip: Aaah, they dreamin’ spirits, they always been there. I suppose we call ‘em ghosts, ya know ? (Image 25).

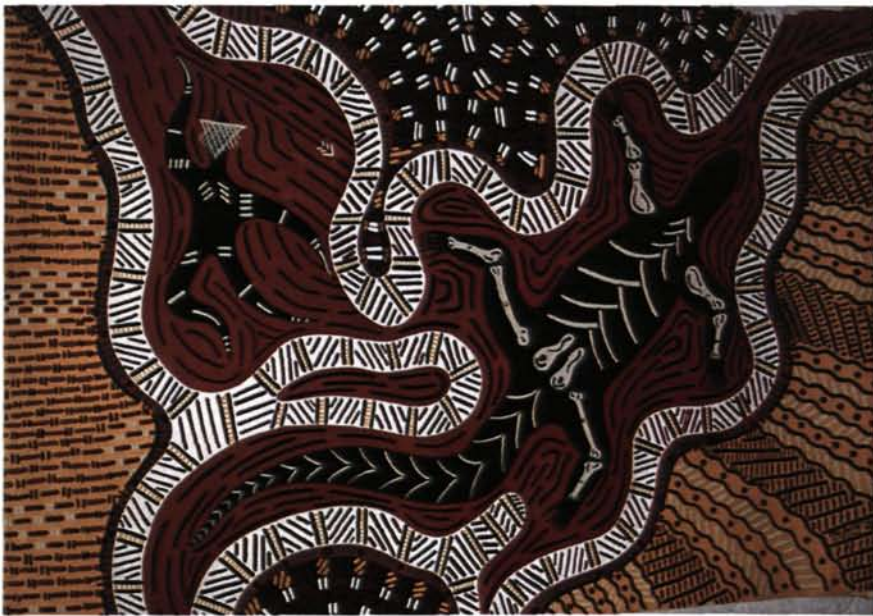


Image 25. Acrylic painting by Phillip Bates showing ‘spirit man’ and *thuli* (sand goanna).

Phillip had also completed a picture of his family with their faces obscured by the same mesh-like design; I asked him why he had done this.

Phillip: Aaah, they will always be like that, yeah. Like, you can talk to me now but when you go away you could change. You know what I mean?

Lorraine: Mmm. An' if you were showing your face there, what would, what could I do? What difference would that make?

Phillip: That'd be me.

Lorraine: I'd see too much of you? Is that what you're saying? You don't expose too much of yourself?

Phillip: Yeah. No, no, I don't show myself to anyone (Image 26).



Image 26. Acrylic painting which Phillip says is of him and his 'woman' and 'kids'. He says that the painting represents what it is to live in the city and the freedom and feeling of going back to his country.

Whilst Phillip and others (see chapters six and seven) indicate that representations in some art objects can index certain effects, responses, inferences and interpretations, I am also interested in semiotic and linguistic notions of what art objects *mean* and are *made* to mean discursively. This is not to assert a special language of art. As Gell states,

Visual art objects are objects about which we may, and commonly do, speak – but they themselves either do not speak, or they utter natural language in graphemic code. We talk

about objects, using signs, but art objects are not, except in special cases, signs themselves, with 'meanings'; and if they do have meanings, then they are *part of language* (i.e. graphic signs), not a separate 'visual' language (1998:6).

It was my experience that the art works of Wilcannia were generally discursively explained and that the discourse about art works framed and formed part of the works' cultural meaning and importance. Discourse was a major 'part of the action' and efficacy of the works for both the *artists* and the receiving *audience*.

Art and Culture – A Meaningful Liaison

People in Wilcannia create art works for many reasons, social, cultural, economic and political. This is indeed the point. I do not suggest that art will offer up some holistic amalgam of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identity. As Jennifer Biddle states, "to reify the artwork is to limit what we know of a culture to a canvas" (Biddle 2003). Art should not be made to 'stand for' *a culture* in any bounded, essentialising sense. *Artists* in Wilcannia produce art for different reasons and with different motivations. As with all cultures, people in Wilcannia "can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context dependent and may shift rapidly" (Ewing 1990:251). The art works and the *artists* that I have engaged with 'speak' to and of the complexities of what constitutes and is made to constitute Aboriginal (with particular reference to Barkindji) identity and culture. The works and the *artists* do this in complex ways. Nevertheless, although the ways in which art and culture are figured is diverse, there is no doubt that their liaison serves as a means to objectify culture.

Because the people of Wilcannia have been portrayed in mostly negative ways according to Anglo-Australian values, and given the value that art has in western ideology, the production of 300 "art works" in Wilcannia over a twelve month period raises interesting questions. Robert Layton (1991:44) assesses art objects in terms of their impact as "agents of an ideology upon the form of social relations". Given this agential aspect of art works, where does art sit within Aboriginal cultural values in Wilcannia? In what ways is art seen to be related to 'culture'?

Of no less importance is the continuation of art production in Wilcannia for reasons other than the art market. I am not suggesting that Wilcannian *artists* are here conforming to the 'art for art's sake' dictum so emphasised as an indicator of 'real' 'high art'. They are, I would suggest, practicing (in part) a new dictum of 'art for culture's sake'. That is, art is a

means to maintain, re-define, re-discover, remember, re-make and teach 'culture', whilst at the same time being part of culture. This is not to dismiss art which is specifically produced for the art market or with point of sale in mind. On the contrary, unlike the ongoing myth¹⁰⁴ of 'art for art's sake' which sees the commercialisation of art as an aberration from art's *raison d'être*, the sale of art in Wilcannia is a sign of success, in both cultural and economic terms: these are not mutually exclusive categories. As is the case for other colonised peoples, "makers of objects have frequently manipulated commodity production in order to serve economic needs as well as new demands for self-representation and self-identification made urgent by the establishment of colonial hegemonies" (Phillips and Steiner 1999:3). The urgency of which Phillips and Steiner speak, specifically the prescience evoked by land rights, native title and an increasing identity politics, is indeed a motivator in matters of cultural production in Wilcannia. This is particularly the case as people have become more aware of the colonising discourses and their effects.

Aboriginal people recognise art's power to engage in these discourses and to communicate cultural values and concerns, as well as its potential to be less confrontational than other more direct actions and expressions. Art becomes a way of representing individual and group views which touch upon many social and cultural issues.

Art's ability to provide cultural and social views in a less antagonistic way is expressed by Badger Bates (the focus of chapter seven). Badger made the following statement in the foreword of an art gallery catalogue which was published for an exhibition where his work and the work of other Aboriginal people was being shown,

Well I am just glad that we have another chance, Aboriginal people of western New South Wales, to go around and expose ourselves more to the art world and more people can get involved. Because I feel that down this way we haven't got a real lot of land that we own, we know our country but we haven't got any land that we can go out on, so, and with all the developments like the cotton farming you know, and they are draining the rivers out, it's just ruining out culture and its breakin our heart". But when we get up and try to express ourselves and tell people to look after the environment, they just call us trouble making black people so we do it in a different way, we just express ourselves in and do it in our artwork (Mildura Arts Centre 2002).

Here, art provides an avenue and a mode of expression through which Aboriginal concerns about the environment of the Darling River, the loss of country and its effects on people and culture is relayed and expressed to Others. Again, however, I do not suggest that the art

104 Bourdieu destroys the myth of 'art for art's sake' (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002:146-168). Yet notably, this does not prevent the general continuance of this illusion within art world discourses and rhetoric.

somehow does this independently of the *artists* and/or the art world discourse. It is my experience that the ‘story’ of the art is almost always sought by white buyers. Papunya Tula artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra says that “without the story, the painting is nothing” (cited in Nicholls 2000:8). Certainly the story is a stated and intrinsic part of art works for many white buyers of Wilcannia art. Moreover, some Wilcannia *artists* explicitly state that “you can’t appreciate it” (the art) without the story.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, as with Tjakamarra and many other artists from the Central and Western desert, represent stories of their Dreamings in their art. However, the strictly gendered, kin-based structures and associated custodial rights to images that operate in certain Aboriginal communities are not so stringently applied in Wilcannia. Because many of the kinship structures have broken down in Wilcannia, stories and representations of Dreamings are of a more holistic Barkindji-wide nature. This is not to say that certain stories are not seen as ‘belonging’ to particular Barkindji linguistic groups: arguments about who owns stories and disagreements about whether a story is being told “the right way” do occur. However, I did not encounter any arguments over what was represented in art works. Although there are no stringent or retributive sanctions of law practiced in the matter of representation of Dreamings per se, there is a clear restriction by some *artists* on the amount of knowledge about a story that will be talked about to non-Barkindji in terms of the story’s representations (see chapter six). Moreover, many *artists* “get wild” if other non-Barkindji Aboriginal people copy what they consider to be Barkindji “art styles”, and some *artists* who have developed what they consider to be *their own* unique stylistic identity get very annoyed when they perceive that this is being copied by other Aboriginal people, including Barkindji.

Some of the Wilcannia art works are Dreaming stories about ancestral beings, their sites, forms and journeys. Others are narratives about family coming to Wilcannia, portray environmental degradation and its consequences, tell personal stories of being “lost in the bush” or depict native plants and animals, their characteristics, habits and uses as food and medicine. All are stories which can be told and ‘talked about’. Nevertheless, despite art being a recognised way of getting a message across, there is also at times some annoyance that white buyers always require *the* “story” or an explanation of the art work.

Emu Eggs – Depictions and Their Changing Interpretations

The carving of emu eggs is expressed as being a pursuit which has been undertaken by both men and women for as long as most can remember.¹⁰⁵ Emu eggs and their changing depictions serve as a vehicle to understanding how cultural production has changed across time and changing political circumstance. Some families in Wilcannia, Broken Hill and Menindee have emu eggs which they say were carved by family members prior to the late 1970's. These eggs depict a range of subjects, from those associated with the pastoral industry such as cowboy-type figures on bucking broncos, to figurative depictions such as male and female hunting scenes, male and female heads in profile, and native animals. The 'hunting' or 'gathering' scenes are mostly depicted in 'historic' form; that is, the men wear 'lap laps' and the women are generally naked.

According to some, what was depicted on eggs for sale was subject to the white fashions, social mores and demand of the time. Sarah Martin (1996:12), writing about an unspecified period¹⁰⁶ post settlement and prior to 1992, comments that "Most emu egg carvers depicted European influenced scenes or motifs, including bucking horses, native animals, or depictions of the 'noble savage'". She continues, "The irony was not lost on the carvers, but the economic hardship made it necessary to be buyer orientated" (Martin 1996:12). Kleinert also speaks of the production of emu eggs as part of an Aboriginal economy, although she takes the view that the production of emu eggs and other crafts "far from representing a form of cultural colonization...might be seen [instead] as a form of strategic resistance that successfully disrupted the disciplined approach to regular, dutiful labour favoured by government authorities" (2000:244-245).

Moreover, whilst Martin (1996) considers the irony of the depictions, Kleinert suggests that although some of the depictions were drawn from the "vernacular art form popular among itinerant workers from the mid-nineteenth century onward", the makers "also drew upon the cultural memories embodied in rock art imagery [and] the skills acquired in carved wooden weapons" (2000:244). She adds that "in all cases, whether the forms outwardly resemble earlier traditions of appropriate – in a form of bricolage – from a colonial genre, they do so

¹⁰⁵ Emu egg carving is not readily practiced today by many people under about fifty years of age. Younger people prefer to 'paint' scenes and subjects on the eggs as it is much quicker and there is less chance of breaking the fragile egg through the thinning of shell layers. This does not seem to have anything to do with availability of eggs. One station holder told me that Aboriginal people can, at times, collect 300 eggs in one day on his property. Hunting and collecting eggs as a cultural activity and for food still occurs (Martin 1996:12).

¹⁰⁶ Although Martin does not specify an exact period of time, a guide of between 1950 and 1983 might be deduced.

from a culturally distinctive, Indigenous perspective” (Kleinert 2000:245), clearly emphasising the exercise of Aboriginal agency. Whilst there may indeed have been a certain level of irony in some of the depictions, and whilst the sale of carving was, as one *artist* said, “our survival” and therefore an economic necessity, I believe there has been a more recent and reflexive re-figuring of how some of these ‘past’ depictions are now being interpreted and considered – as well as a re-interpretation of what motivated and motivates the choice of depictions.

Beckett points out that in Wilcannia in the 1950’s, children felt ashamed of anything which was seen to be part of “the old ways”: like speaking the lingo, or singing or dancing the old songs, increasingly disregarding “the traditional culture [and placing] a negative valuation on some of its features” (1958b:93-95). Concomitantly, the production of quite idealised noble savage images at that time was not perhaps the preferred choice of depiction for some. However, as Aboriginal people in Wilcannia increasingly experienced an awakened interest in “our tradition”, native animals and noble savage images have become the depictions of choice. These are not ironically portrayed, but are part of an inter and intra-cultural process to educate self and Other and are a source of pride.

It is interesting that there do not appear to be any recent depictions of cattle mustering or bucking broncos, given the close historical involvement of many Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry, and the feeling of pride and recognition it continues to generate (cf. Beckett 2005b; Cowlishaw 2004a; MacDonald 2004; McGrath 1987). Aboriginal people rode, tamed and talked of bucking horses; therefore, these were also the lived practices of Aboriginal cultural life for many people. Their absence from contemporary art works should be (in part). considered in terms of a politics that insists on the demonstration of continuous ‘tradition’ to gain rights to land, thereby (if indirectly) negating as spurious that which is ‘touched’ by white influence, including images of bucking broncos.

Badger Bates, who has been carving eggs since he was a small boy, told me that when he first “kicked off carving [eggs], I was just doing bullocks and that, because I worked on stations and rode in rodeos”. “All the old people used to wear R. M. Williams – silk shirts, big hats – men and women”. It was only much later in the early eighties, when Badger saw the engravings, carvings and stencils of his ancestors at Mutawintji National Park for the first time, that he said he thought to himself, “I’m going to change all this [carving bullocks,

etc]”. “Then when I saw Mutawintji, I felt, this is not right carving foreign animals. Emu, porcupine¹⁰⁷, kangaroo they my food. They what helped me in my life” (Image 27).



Image 27. Rock art stencils at Mutawintji. Author's photograph reproduced by permission of William Bates, Chairperson Mutawintji Land Council (2004).

The first time Badger went to Mutawintji in 1983 he was a Cultural Sites Officer for the New South Wales, NPWS. During this period some “Aboriginal people living in Wilcannia and Broken Hill” had mounted a blockade at Mutawintji “in protest against its desecration by unsupervised tourists” (Beckett 2005a).¹⁰⁸ Badger said he then began to reflect on his early experiences as a child and of the stories and ways he had been taught. Although he says he considers that riding horses in rodeos is also part of him and his life, and therefore part of his ‘culture’ of the time, access to Mutawintji and information about his ‘people’, together with the identity politics and discourses of the 1970’s and 1980’s, arguably concatenated to construct a belief that carving bullocks was not right, not part of an Aboriginal identity or a representation of Aboriginal culture that he wished to either project or invest in. In terms of art representation, there has been a reflexive distancing from that which is not broadly understood to be part of an acceptable and understood form of Aboriginality.

107 Aboriginal people in Wilcannia call the echidna “porcupine” for the most part.

108 In 1998, Mutawintji was formally handed back by the New South Wales Government to William Bates, a representative of the Mutawintji Land Council. William is Badger’s first cousin, and held the position of Chairperson of the Land Council until replaced by Kim O’Donnell in 2004.

Badger's 1993 lino print 'Life on the Darling' (Image 28), depicts both native animals and idealised noble savage images and his emu-eggs (Image 29) show many native animals. This is a common practice amongst most other Wilcannian Aboriginal artists. Whilst these are images popularly associated with 'traditional' Aborigines, and whilst these are also eminently marketable depictions (the preference of whites), it would be incorrect to say that their production is motivated only by market return. Importantly, however, according to the artists these works do not have any intended irony.

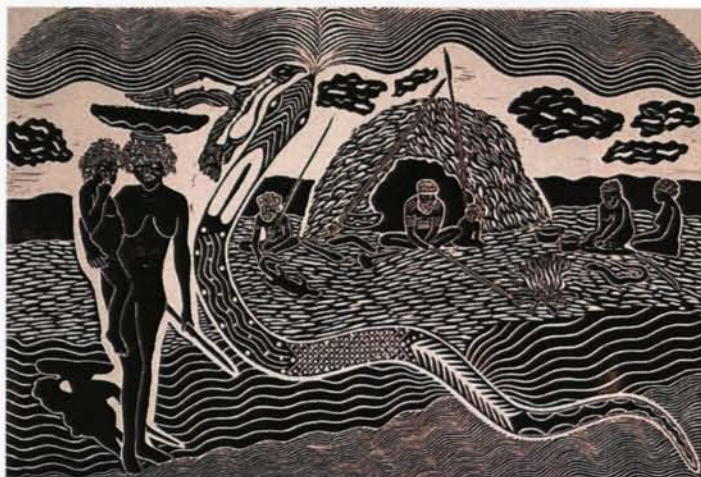


Image 28. Lino print 'Life on the Darling' by Badger Bates.



Image 29. Emu egg carved by Badger Bates.

I asked Badger why he called his lino print 'Life on the Darling' when life on the Darling (according to my perception) was not like that depicted. He said, "We still hunt, we still eat wild meat, we still fish". Nevertheless, these images should not be viewed as some self-deception, or as depicting only the past. Whilst it is true that boomerangs are no longer used for hunting, people no longer live in "gunyas" or "mia-mia's" (bark huts or bough shelters)¹⁰⁹, and

109 People in Wilcannia talk of *mya-myas* and *gunyas* (phonetically reproduced) when referring to Aboriginal huts or bough shelters. I asked a few people where *mya-myas* and *gunya* might have come from as these terms were not listed in *The Paakantyi [Barkindji] Dictionary* compiled by Linguist Luise Hercus (1993). One man said that he thought *mya mya* was an adaptation of a whitefellas term, and that *gunya* was a Wiradjuri word. He said that *yaparra* or *yaparra kooldi* (phonetically spelt) is the Barkindji word for bark hut or house. I did find a reference to *mya-myas* in Reay's paper on 'The mixed-blood aborigines in north-western NSW' (1949:89 & 92). In the book 'The Story of the Falling Star', (1989) a story told by Barkindji woman Elsie Jones, the word for bark hut is *puungka*. I did not hear this term used. Luise Hercus gives the Barkindji term for hut or house as *kuntyi* and Aboriginal shade hut as *punga* (1993:118). Elsie Jones was one of Luise Hercus main language informants.

men and women no longer walk around either naked or wear the minimal coverings of their ancestors, the differences seem to be construed in terms of 'clothing', 'accoutrements' and 'tools' as opposed to a completely altered ontology. Although some 'old ways' are no longer practiced in the same way, many are seen and experienced as being continuous, if taking different forms. These depictions are a means of maintaining a particular identity: they reflect an ontological view which persists through certain practices as well as a reflexive thinking about culture. They are part of a political and cultural moment which both draws upon and uses the conflation of art and culture to teach, to re-think, to re-make, to re-produce, to *continue* culture.

Another *artist* told me that he had "started out drawin' Mickey Mouse "cartoons an' that". He said he did this until "Uncle Badger" influenced his thinking and the direction of his art work, particularly in relation to content. Badger told him to "paint what belong to you", "your own culture". I doubt whether drawings of Mickey Mouse would sell well as "Aboriginal art", despite Mickey Mouse (as well as bullocks and bucking horses) being part of (his and others) 'life as lived'. Indeed, all art and 'doodles' that I saw were notable for their emphasis on what might be considered to be 'typical' 'traditional' images. This is not to suggest that content is overridden by market considerations: which is not the case. It is to suggest that culture and what this means has taken on a new impetus and a new importance in the lives of many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and *artists* now express this through particular representations and subjects. There are clearly cultural limits to cultural production as well as shifting recognitions of what *does* and *will* constitute culture for both blackfellas and whitefellas. The *artist* who no longer paints Mickey Mouse resisted painting a platypus on a mural in Ivanhoe jail because this was "not his meat"¹¹⁰ and "was not his". Culture and its representation are not a 'free for all', despite the broad definitions and interpretations of Aboriginal culture writ large.

Nevertheless, I do think that there is an element of nostalgia and longing operating in some of these representations that cannot be discounted. For a group of people, many of whom feel "strong" in culture but for whom certain factors mitigate the possibility of living and doing as they might wish, art allows for a remembering and expressing of that which is

¹¹⁰ Marie Reay (1949:106) stated that strangers to camps in north-western NSW are asked "what meat (clan) are you?" in order to direct him to the camp where he will be looked after by his own people. People in Wilcannia identify their meats as their "totems"; the more common being emu, kangaroo, eaglehawk and dingo. Marie Reay's (1945) field-notes from a discussion with Barkindji man Hero Black in Bourke states that the "Gilpara" moiety is divided into sand-goanna, emu, pademelon, possum and carpet-snake, and the "Makawara", into bandicoot, kangaroo, dingo, eaglehawk and bilby.

denied: for example, access to privately owned land, as well as those less physical barriers which are created by current living conditions. As Barkindji people have lost much access to country, art is one form of expressing how lost access to elements of country can be held onto and lived by depiction. In talking about the Inuit, Berlo (1999:91) states that, "For many artists, drawing the old ways rather than continuing to follow them is a way of maintaining identity". To draw, paint or carve a camp site, a water hole no longer visited or a favourite activity no longer practiced, compels an affective sensoria. Memories of places, people and events, the smells and feelings are *drawn* from operant conditioning to be 'present' in the act of 're-presentation. The art work resonates, strikes a chord, rings a bell not only for the *artist* but for those who view it. This is not to promote an essentialising continuity of 'tradition', nor am I suggesting that somehow culture is consolidating itself in a way of life no longer 'present' or 'practiced'. Culture "...is a continuing construction which both organizes and emerges from people's behaviour" (MacClancy 1997:3). What I am saying is that Aboriginal culture has for many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia become a more self-conscious matter: and art is a tangible expression of this consciousness.

It seems to me that Wilcannia Aboriginal people, in terms of the white imagination, are never at the right place at the right time. What I mean by this is that as Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have begun to draw pride from and show an increasing and greater interest in "our traditions", the dominant society continues to dictate what these will be, how they will be imagined and who is permitted to have them. As Aboriginal people reject bucking horses in favour of native animals, Dreamings, and noble savage images, the general populace reject their validity on the basis of previous discourse (including scholarly) about 'tradition' and who can authentically have this. In an ironic twist scholars are now beginning to recognise bucking broncos as valid evidence of culture whilst the general populace treats 'rural' and 'urban' depictions of 'tradition' with a mixture of confusion and contempt.

What Art 'Does' and its Relationship to 'Culture'

Aboriginal people often express frustration at the shifting and contextual nature of Aboriginal culture and identity as directed by dominant culture. However, as the re-directed nature of the content of some *artists'* work suggest, there are also possibilities for self and group identification through the 'culture of art'. In talking about art and culture and sharing this with others/Others, 'art' has the potentiality to bring things into being: it has productive dimensions. Art works serve at once as visual existential narratives, cultural mnemonics,

ontological definers and creators of identity. Identity can be affirmed and expressed through both the practice of art-making, the selected content and in talking about the art.

There are several explicitly stated reasons why people make art works as well as ‘talk about’ art works. Some of the reasons given for undertaking the practice of art making are: to express a personal connection with ‘country’ and cultural knowledge, to show that “we still have culture”, to fulfil cultural obligations, to make political statements, to educate whitefellas, to teach Aboriginal children, as a recreational pursuit (“it’s somethin’ to do”), to make money and as a form of concretising cultural continuity. Whether all agree on what ‘art’ is or is not, and whether ‘art’ is always ‘culture’ for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, ‘art’ as ‘cultural capital’ is recognised by most if not all Aboriginal people I met.

People in Wilcannia create art works to greater and lesser degrees. For some, after a sustained period or periods of creating art works, they “give it up” completely. For others creating art works is a sporadic activity which may be undertaken infrequently or daily, for days or weeks and then not at all for weeks, months or years. For example, Willie Don Hunter an *artist* that I spent time with in Wilcannia sold twelve (that I know of) fairly large canvases over a twelve-month period, averaging approximately four hundred dollars each. Local Aboriginal people describe these pieces as “Barkindji style” paintings (refer to ‘Place

lines – Art Styles and Subject Matter as a Means of Affirming Cultural Identity’ this chapter). They also conform to the white buyers’ notion of ‘traditional’ art works. That is, the people who bought them liked and commented on the “more traditional” muted and limited palette of red and brown ochres, black and white, as well as the content of the work: *Ngatji* (The Rainbow Serpent), fish from the River, and native animals (Image 30 and Image 31).

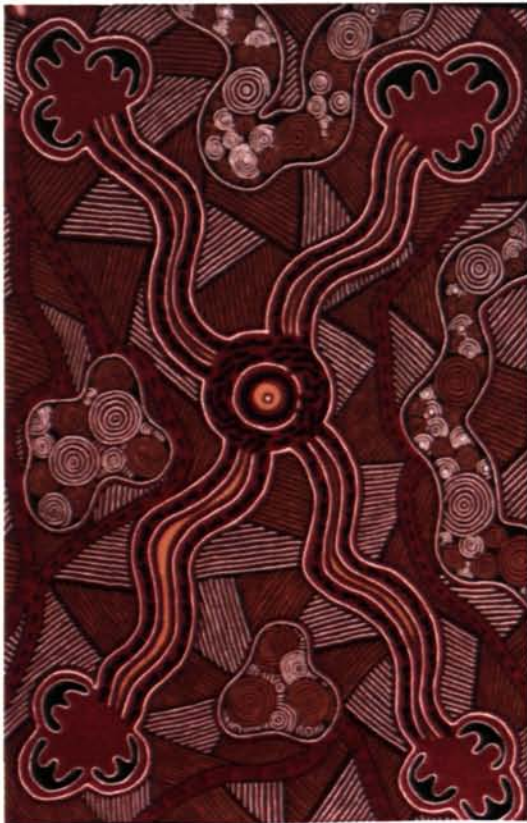


Image 30. Acrylic painting on canvas by Willie Don Hunter.



Image 31. Acrylic on canvas painting by Willie Don Hunter.

I was talking one day to this *artist* and he told me he was going to “knock out” a painting so that he could “buy a telly for my kids”. His kids, he said, would not stay with him if he didn’t have a television – they would go and stay with other relatives. This man then painted a canvas over two days and sold it for \$400 to the local Motel owner. There is clear

recognition of art as a commodity here, but I argue that this man’s paintings should not be viewed as pure commodities. Although this *artist* talks about “knocking out” a painting, I suggest that this description alludes more to the time taken to complete the work and the urgent need for cash, than it does the care with which he considers the content and form of the work. Moreover, in terms of life as lived and as he wishes life to be lived, that is, with his children, culture as art and culture as commodity are inseparable.

Phillip Bates told me that he paints “just about every day. Like, it’s not a job or anything, it’s art now. It’s just get part of life”. Although Phillip has not lived in Wilcannia for some years and has moved to Broken Hill – 200 kilometres further west of Sydney – he continues to sign all of his work ‘Phillip Bates Wilcannia’. He said that he asked his Elders and uncles “no matter where I live can I put Wilcannia on there, you know?” When they asked him why, he told them that people say nothing good comes out of Wilcannia and of how it is still home for him, emphasising Wilcannia as being the locus of his identity. Phillip’s words and works demonstrate the personal as well as the inter and intra-cultural role and motivations of art making as well as the effects and affects of art-making and the relationship of art to culture as well as to identity.

The content of Phillip’s art making, the practice of which is now “part of life” has been influenced by his travels (in Australia) as well as by his father, Badger Bates,

I'm sorta, I've been around, ya know. I seen lotta Myall people art work an' that. An' my Father's art work. An' I gotta lotta influence off him – my Father. He told me lotta stories. An' what he told me I tried to put in my pictures, you know. An' the way I see that is our dreamtime still alive cos he telling me a story an' I'm painting his story, ya know? That's, that's my thing, ya know? To keep our culture alive. That's the way I see it. So there you are (Image 32).



Image 32. Acrylic on canvas by Phillip Bates.

Given Phillip's articulated motivation for painting every day and given that he can earn upwards of \$300 per painting yet does not consider it "a job or anything" but as "part of life", this supports a proposition that art-making does *something* as well as satisfying economic possibilities. According to Phillip, culture is kept alive by the practice of painting and through the stories in the painting. In this way, as Phillip explains, "Our dreamtime still alive". It is not past and no more – it continues and lives through Phillip's father, through Phillip and through their art. I asked Phillip why he started painting and he told me that,

I do lotta. Mainly for my kids, you know. An' it's for other little kids so they see that our culture – not dyin', you know. It's still alive. Cos it's drummed into everyone's head everyday that, ah, this mob losing their culture or whatever, you know? But me out here in the West, you know, our people learnin' our culture again, you know? ...So I say I paint for my kids an' for the future kids, ya know? How they understand things a bit better. Yeah.

Phillip alludes here to culture being both continuous and re-learned. Not only the practice of painting but the content of painting is important to his agenda. In trying to assert culture, a

struggle which is ongoing for Wilcannia Aboriginal people, the words of Holland and Lave (Holland and Lave 2001:28) resonate: "In practice, participants struggle to affect the implications of different versions and meanings of ongoing practice for their future lives, especially for their children and for their own future place in history".

What Phillip paints, what he teaches and what the children learn are all connected to the past and to the future. Art and culture are inseparable here, the practice of art-making signifies 'culture' as it is also, and at once, a signifying practice. Art makes culture, culture makes art, culture *is* art, and 'art' *is* 'culture'. Culture is kept alive and re-learned through, in Phillip's case, painting daily. This practice is one of "making culture" (Sherry Ortner in Myers 1994:964).

Phillip intimates that art plays an important role in redressing Wilcannia's portrayal in the media as having nothing of cultural value to speak of when he says,

We always get shit from the news about nothing good comes out of here, only bad, you know? But, wherever I go, I might have an exhibition, paintins, ya know and stuff. People will ask me, you know. Do you come from Wilcannia? An' then I can say yes I do. It's not a bad place it's just what people make of it, you know? It's good. That's my, my way of I suppose of just sayin', you know, I'm from there, I'm not a bad person.

Phillip sees the presentation of art work to be something which can demonstrate 'good' or 'worth', a vicarious carrier of positive cultural images and signs. On one level, Phillip is responding to the contemporary reputation that Wilcannia has gained through a particular kind of reporting in the mainstream media. In this vein, Wilcannia is a problem town, a town which has a problem with Aborigines who are themselves a problem. On another level Phillip's comments can be considered to allude to the role that art plays in ascribing positive identity to certain groups of Aboriginal people. Phillip seems to be appealing to the "common humanity" theme as this is attached to western notions of 'art' (Myers 1991:34-35). In respect to the acrylic art of the central and western desert, Myers (1991) sees this as occurring at two levels. In the case of Wilcannia art I consider only one of these to have relevance to my current exploration, namely, the "assertion/demonstration that they [Aboriginal people] have 'art', value it, and that the tradition is very old (implying that they are able to preserve things of value) and that therefore their culture is vital and worthy of respect" (Myers 1991:35). Phillip's statements suggest that in showing his art work, and tying himself in some way to the work, the art work will in some ways reflect not only his worth but that of people in Wilcannia.

Place Lines – Art Styles and Subject Matter as a Means of Affirming Cultural Identity

That Barkindji ‘don’t do dots’ references their difference from some of the central and western desert *artists* (who are known for this style) as well as other Aboriginal people who “do dot paintin’” and to whom (according to Barkindji) dots are seen not to belong. Barkindji people’s assertion that “we don’t do dots” or “not too many dots” signifies Barkindji difference as well as uniqueness. It also speaks of continuity in relation to ‘who we *still* are’.

Following the return of the coordinator and one of the *Kaathiri* art centre *artist’s* visit to Alice Springs in the 1980’s “a rush of dot painting” ensued. This was short lived and due, at least in part, to certain individuals beginning to impress upon people that ‘dots’ were “not from here”, that dots “do not belong to us” and are “not Barkindji”. This increased awareness, or at least overt and explicit articulation of what belongs to “us”, coincides with the previously mentioned factors of increasing Aboriginal political awareness and engagement from the late 1970’s onwards, including the Mutawintji blockade. An increasing push towards and availability of Aboriginal-designated positions related to ‘Aboriginal cultural heritage’, particularly in the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) from the 1970’s onwards also saw many Aboriginal people gain increased (if not in some cases their first) access to cultural heritage sites and historical, anthropological and archaeological information.

The profile given to Aboriginal culture and heritage (specifically in relation to the visual arts and as a result of the earlier Papunya movement), the lead up to the bicentenary of Australia celebrations (Lattas 1990; Merlan 2001) and the “often synecdochic representations of Aboriginal culture as ‘art’” (Merlan 2001:204) increased Aboriginal awareness of how ‘wider society’ was thinking about, drawing on and mediating Aboriginal ‘culture’ and identity. In addition to this, “Land rights has demanded that both Aborigines and whites develop and articulate definitions of a unique Aboriginal identity” (Jacobs 1988:31).

The awareness of a unique Aboriginal identity is made explicit in statements such as “we do lines”, “ours is lines”, “we don’t do dots”, “dots are not ours”; and through the artistic practice of the *absence* of dots and the *presence* of lines. This association was relayed to me by many *artists*, and they in turn relayed to others that (cultural authority) figures such as Murray Butcher or Badger Bates say, “we do lines”, we “don’t do dots”, etc. When seeking affirmation from these same ‘authoritative’ figures, people would ask, “ours is lines unna, Unc?” Phillip Bates said that he “started out doin’ dot paintings for a while an’ then Dad

explained, you know, that's not our culture to do dot painting. So, I learnt how to do all my people's designs, you know, like river people an' that".

The 'lines' reference relates to the incised geometric and wavy lines which are a feature of Barkindji and other Western NSW wooden artifacts, some of which (dating from around 1890) are held in the Australian Museum in Sydney. Barkindji *artists* make use of the representational systems which Morphy describes as indigenous to much of the south east of Australia (Morphy 2001:339). In these systems "the geometric element is predominant, with diamond patterns and curvilinear forms interspersed with oblongs, squares and oval features...the art of the southeast shares in common with the art of the centre the repeated outlining of the form of the central features" (Morphy 2001:339). Kleinert also refers to the distinctive geometric design elements of south east NSW which were initially a feature of the elaborately carved and incised weapons, displaying "cross-hatching, herring-bone, chevrons, zigzags, diamonds, and rhomboids – used in conjunction with an equally rich array of figurative imagery" (2000:241).

At least three of the *artists* I worked with have had access to the Barkindji weapons and other artifacts held in the Australian Museum collection and it is clear that these visits had a significant impact on them (see chapters six and seven). According to Phillip Bates, who visited the Australian Museum on a school excursion as a young boy, "I seen some stuff there. Yeah. Like the people we was with, they showed – sorta said – this your people here, an' that. An' we had a couple of our elders from home with us an' they was telling us, you know, this our mob here, 'n things". Phillip remembers the shields, boomerangs and spears that he saw and recalls that "it was a good buzz" to see his people's work.

The lines particularly are a kind of mantra for Barkindji *artists* Badger Bates and Murray Butcher, and have become such for several other *artists*. Indeed, for many other Aboriginal people in Wilcannia these lines are now generally seen as being part of a "Barkindji style". For a number of the *artists* it is important that they "do what belong to us" – what they own. Some also see it as "ripping people off" if you do dot painting and you are not from the "mob who do that dot paintin".

In the Barkindji case, these geometric designs are often used as outline and infill for figurative motifs such as landforms, boomerangs, clubs, hand stencils, bird and animal life of the Baaka area such as freshwater fish, river turtles, goannas and their prints as well as mythical sites and beings such as Ngatji (The Rainbow Serpent). Also present is the

repetitive outlining of form which Morphy describes as being characteristic of the South East as well as the Centre (Morphy 2001:339) (Image 33). Many Barkindji people say the free flowing and repetitive lines are used to represent particular flowing rivers and creeks through their directional use and shape and also flowing water more generally (Image 34).



Image 33. Acrylic on canvas showing Ngatji by Wayne Ebsworth.

Although scholars refer to the infilling of motifs and designs as having significance, this significance and its meaning is not known (Morphy 2001:340).

However, free flowing and curvilinear lines *within* and *around* a motif are also said to represent “the Darlin”, “the river”. This might be interpreted as demonstrating the importance of the river and its interconnectedness to people, animals and objects. Country in general which has no rivers and creeks is also sometimes depicted with wavy lines which Badger says “just come natural to us”. Badger posits that he doesn’t know whether “it’s because of the river, we respect the river so much that we put wavy lines in to represent water and creeks and stuff”. This ‘natural’ feeling for *water as line* represented in and through art works is however not ‘natural’ for every ‘Barkindji’ person who creates art works. This becomes evident in the *corrective* and pedagogic stress that people such as Badger and Murray put on defining what is and what is not Barkindji to *artists* and others.



For example, lines are Barkindji, “dots” and “dolphins” and “turtles with fins”¹¹¹ are not.

Image 34. Acrylic on board showing freshwater turtles by Willie Don Hunter.

111 Darling River freshwater turtles have claws unlike the fins of saltwater turtles.

Although *artists* are not explicitly restrained from drawing and painting what they like in terms of both content and style, there is a strong and explicit desire to learn from people such as Murray, Badger and others about “what is ours”, “what is Barkindji”. There is at some level a tacit understanding that certain Barkindji *artists*, certain art styles and certain content reflect degrees of Barkindji cultural knowledge which are in turn linked to levels of cultural authority. What is painted, who paints it and the way it is painted concatenate to effect and reflect this knowledge and authority in a circular feedback process.

There is some difference of opinion between Aboriginal people from Wilcannia and those from “away” as to what *should* constitute the subjects and designs used in art: in what ways and whether these *need* to be validated by the *artists*. I attended an end of year exhibition at Broken Hill which displayed the work of students completing the ‘Certificate II in Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Practices’. This course was designed for Aboriginal people and prioritised Aboriginal enrolment; however, any spare places could be taken up by non-Aboriginal people. One of the female students, an Aboriginal *artist* (a Barkindji woman) from Wilcannia¹¹², was showing me one of her works at the exhibition; she said that the teacher, a Sydney arts graduate and “Koori”, had asked her why she had painted a frill necked-lizard unfilled with geometric lines. She said that she answered “cos I’m a blackfella”, and the teacher responded by saying “that’s not good enough”.

When I spoke to this teacher later about the importance of subject matter and style, he said that, “Indigenous *artists* have a moral and ethical responsibility to produce art from the area”. He said that he is trying to get students to think [that] “the complicated thing about Indigenous art is about shifting community consciousness to thinking about art making and the power of art making”. He said that the “traditional community does not exist anymore”, that it was “fine to reproduce animal life and traditional stories” but he wants students to ask “what relationship do I have to a traditional story today”. He considers and asks “how can rock engravings be re-interpreted and put into painting, what is the relationship?”

Pressures to make art works which ‘conform’ to the various established ideals regarding what is, or what is not, a ‘valid’ and ‘true’ subject for an art work by an Aboriginal person are created by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. These pressures can in turn be

112 This woman (who lived mostly in Broken Hill), was one of only two women I met who was gaining or had received some art-training in a dominant society institution.

seen to demand as well as to affect a validating relationship between the works, the people making the works and Aboriginal culture as imagined, expressed and lived.

Berlo states that there,

...has long been a bipolar model at work in the field of ethnographic arts. Much scholarship has focused on normative statements about the group, about tradition, and about a collective aesthetic instead of what is specific and individual. The resulting impression that individual agency is of less importance in small societies than in our own has been one of the fictions of Western culture and Western scholarship about non-Western art, – a blindness to individuality and creativity under conditions different to our own (1999:178).

In view of this, I am going to focus the next two chapters on two individual *artists* thereby grounding “...my discussion in verifiable particulars rather than broad generalities” (Berlo 1999:180). The next two chapters take a semi-biographical approach to two particular *artists* that I worked with in Wilcannia. It seems to me that if art is contextualised by engaging not only with the art works, but also with the life of the *artist*, we can see how ‘taken for granted’ notions of art and *artists*, as well as Aboriginal culture writ large, are contested and negotiated. I include here an engagement with the content and form of art work, the *artist’s* interpretation, when the art is undertaken, why it is undertaken and where the art is undertaken. And, in the case of the Barkindji *artists* I worked with, also the lack of art making, that is, when art is not produced. This tells us something about the complexities that have to be negotiated in the life of many Barkindji people as they grapple with their many roles in life, including that of *artist*.