

Indigenous art: culture or industry?

Suzanne Spinner reports on a success for culturally sensitive conferencing

What became *Kaltja Business* began as *Aboriginal Arts in Review or Interfaces: Aboriginal Arts in a Cross Cultural Context*. The convenor, Michiel Dolk, Lecturer in Art History at the Northern Territory University (NTU), obtained grants of \$75,000 from DEET and \$5000 from the Australia Foundation of Culture and Humanities. In its original incarnation, this conference may have been just another whitefella talkfest. However, in the lead up period it was realised that if the event was to be meaningful and of real benefit to Aboriginal artists, the focus and resource priorities had to radically shift.

Hilary Furlong was appointed coordinator. The name of the conference was changed and its scope widened to encompass an ambitious and exciting workshop program designed to expose artists from remote communities to print making, ceramics, photography and information technology, and set to culminate in a modular mural. The School of Fine Arts voted to suspend all classes for a week so that staff and students could participate and attend.

To fund these changes, including copyright and intellectual property forums, practical workshops and the mural project, additional funding was obtained from ATSIIC, the Association of Northern and Kimberley Aboriginal Artists and the NT Education Department. Ultimately, of a total budget of close to \$125,000, more than 60 per cent went directly to support the

participation and work of Aboriginal artists. The mural and workshops were instigated so that the event would result in "symbolic and real returns for the Aboriginal artists whose work and lives are the whole reason for the conference in the first place".

Kaltja Business was scheduled to coincide with the announcement of the National Aboriginal Art Awards at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, an event which draws everybody who is anybody in the Aboriginal art scene to Darwin. The workshop program ran over the first three days, then the conference proper for the last three days, culminating with the sale of work produced in the workshops.

Artists from communities across the top end of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region as well as from Central Australia were invited and a program was planned for 45 artists, although that number was to grow to 83 artists from ten communities. The vision of the event was grand and the attention to detail immense—bough shelters were constructed and tarps laid on the ground in an area alongside the Fine Arts Building; on the facing wall as a backdrop, grids were placed for the mural so that the artists could work outside on the ground, under shade, in community groups alongside but separate from each other.

Uniform pre-stretched canvasses were available as required and the artists got painting. And paint they did: the mural

grew daily, with varying arrangements and juxtapositions of the paintings. The atmosphere of quiet concentrated work was powerful; to see so many artists from so far afield painting in the one place was awe inspiring. When not painting, the artists came and went to and from the adjacent ceramics, print making and photography studios to learn about and work in media which many had never tried before.

On the fourth day, the conference began. A large shade cloth was erected in the middle between the bough shelters. Chairs and a microphone were brought in and the rest of us got on with serious talk about art. But the bough shelters remained and many people kept on painting, although just as often the artists sat in their groups talking to each other and keeping a watchful eye and ear on the talk. Thoughtful and culturally sensitive planning meant that the art making and the *talking about* were not exclusive but happened side by side in a way that enabled great overlap and cross fertilisation without compromising the integrity of either. What this structure preserved was flexible boundaries between the artists and the conferees and everyone was able to wander between activities. As well as more than 80 artists, 150 people were registered for the conference but the organisers fed no less than 300 people each day.

The spatial geography and sequencing of events contributed greatly to the success of the whole. The other galvanising factor was

the external politics—the conference happened to coincide with news of the pre-budget cuts to ATSIIC, upon which these artist communities depend for their continued survival. Suddenly the event took on an unprecedented cultural/political imperative. *Kaltja Business* became the forum for discussions about these quite desperate issues and a rallying point for organised action and lobbying. The symbolism and clout of such a united show of the strength of Aboriginal art would not have been lost on anyone present, including politicians and arts bureaucrats.

The success of the event can be measured in many ways, from the quality of the speakers and the papers given, to the strength of the art work produced. The success of the business side is evident in the financial returns to the artists. Orders were taken for nearly \$13,000 worth of prints and \$3500 worth of painted ceramics were sold.

However, what best symbolises the conference's success was the mural comprising some 60 paintings by a range of senior painters from these far flung communities. Everyone had painted on the theme of *meeting place* and all the artists agreed it was important the works remain together. They decided to leave the paintings with the organisers while funds were sought for its purchase. Currently the chancellor of NTU has recommended that the University Foundation purchase it and major corporate sponsors have been contacted to provide the \$60,000 required. At this stage things look promising.

Copies of papers and transcripts of the discussions and forums may be ordered from: Kaltja Business, NTU School of Fine Arts, Darwin, NT 0909