



From the heart

HELEN READ'S COMMITMENT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIGENOUS ART MARKET HAS ALSO FACILITATED THE ACQUISITION OF ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST IMPORTANT COLLECTIONS OF ABORIGINAL ART.
 STORY BY **PENELOPE BARKER**.
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER EVE.

Helen Read, dedicated nursing sister turned tough bush pilot in lipstick and lace trimmings, alternative tour operator and art dealer, is a woman with a mission. For the past ten years, she has been patiently accumulating one of Australia's most significant private collections of Aboriginal art – a collection that is highly personal, yet intended from the beginning for public exhibition with the aim of furthering knowledge of Aboriginal cultures and engendering a deeper respect for Aboriginal people.

When not flying her twin-engine Piper Aztec over the vast reaches of the Outback, home for Read is an apartment in Darwin overlooking the waters of the Timor Sea. The apartment is also home to her two businesses, Didgeri Air Art Tours and Palya Art, and a small but breathtaking selection of works from her collection. Two glowing canvases by Makinti Napanangka dominate the living and dining area. Through a doorway between them, a large, exuberant painting by Loma Fencer hangs above Helen's desk in the Didgeri office. In the kitchen is a large bark painting by Dorothy Djukulu and an egret carving from Yirkala in Arnhem Land. Other works include a sculpture of a dog by Lena Yarinkura, a bark by Mick Kubarrku (with an interesting story attached that due to Kubarrku's failing eyesight, Johnny Bulunbulun completed the head), and a series of acrylics on canvas from Balgo Hills by Sam Tjampitjin, Elizabeth Nyumi, Pipita Gordon, Eubena Nampitjin, Nora Wompi and Lucy Yukenbarri. In the bedroom and bathroom, ochres on canvas by the late Queenie Mackenzie adorn the walls.

As well, there are the 60 works which toured Australian regional galleries from March 1998 to December 1999 under the title *A Thousand Journeys: Aboriginal Art from North-West Australia*, "and there's more in storage in Melbourne," adds Read. "I never dreamt in the beginning that I'd have such a big collection. I've worked hard to acquire it." As the important works have become more and more costly to acquire, Read has often put herself out on a financial limb: borrowing money, foregoing all but life's essentials and paying off works in installments.

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Since living and working in the 80s as a nursing sister and midwife in the Aboriginal community of Kintore in the south west of the Northern Territory and living among the Aboriginal people, "my whole raison d'être, my whole life has been on a mission of awareness and facilitating interactions and deeper respect for Indigenous people," states Read.

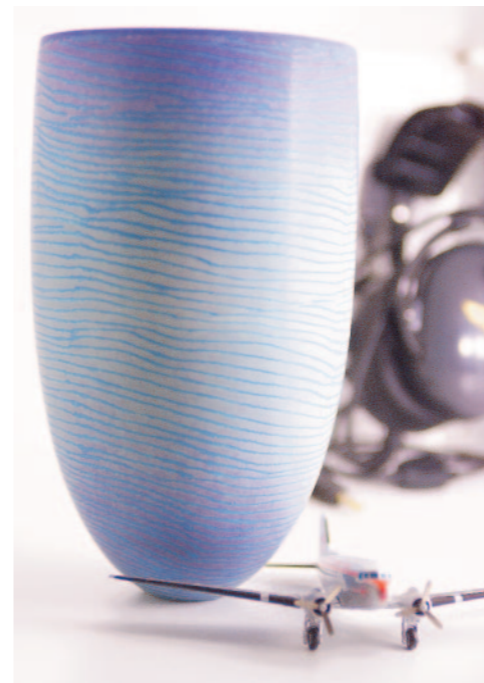
Read originally gained her pilot's licence in order to provide better access to health care in remote outstations but, appalled by the conditions in the communities and lack of educational facilities and adequate health care, she decided there was little she could do through nursing alone. It was then, 10 years ago, that she launched Didgeri Air Art Tours – flying small groups of influential people directly into the communities to witness the reality of the conditions and gain an appreciation of the context of the art produced there. Over three to six days, groups of five at one time are flown on a journey of discovery over thousands of kilometres to reach distant art centres in either the Central Desert, Kimberley or Arnhem Land and the Tiwi Islands, meet with artists and view artworks for sale. The tours barely break even, so Read's income comes from buying and selling art from the community art centres, and holding Palya Art private showings in capital cities during the northern wet season.

The art collectors who go on tour with Read benefit by purchasing the art without gallery mark ups, and they enjoy the unique opportunity to meet the artists and talk about the work they are purchasing. They also have complete assurance and documentation of the authenticity of works. According to Carolynne Hamdorf, art coordinator of Warmun Art Centre in the Kimberley, the benefits are mutual: "Some visits are financially very rewarding, others are successful in establishing exhibitions and educating visitors about the unique aspects of Warmun art." She also points out that "Warmun Art Centre is structured to ensure that the majority of the sale goes directly back to the artist. Such ventures generate non-welfare derived income back to the artist and their families. Prices for artworks are determined by artist seniority, market demand and exhibition history."

Cecelia Alfonso, manager at Warlukurlangu Artists in the Central Desert community of Yuendumu agrees: "Sales of Aboriginal art are a very important source of income for artists and the entire community. Warlukurlangu Artists is one of the few sources of income in Yuendumu apart from other government benefits. Often visitors can't believe that such



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beautiful paintings come out of such an impoverished environment.”

Over the years, Read has flown prominent figures such as the Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir, art collectors such as Colin and Liz Laverty, art dealers and the culturally aware and curious to more than 20 far-flung art-producing communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. And without the resources for advertising, much of Read’s business comes through word of mouth and her solid reputation in the industry. A reputation that, according to Carolynne Hamdorf, is based on “a real concern and interest in Aboriginal people’s welfare and development” and the understanding that “art centres are fortifying and empowering places within the community context.”

Read says that “when Didgeri first flew into a community many of the artists would disappear. They thought we were there on whitefella business and it was none of their business. It took nearly two years before they realised that we were there to listen and to learn. People weren’t used to whitefellas wanting to listen and wanting to speak with them and wanting to learn about country [the English word Aboriginal people use to describe the land of which they are traditional custodians] – it was all new. Then there was a lot of happiness, joy and interaction and cups of tea and holding up every painting and talking about what this one was about and what that one was about. There’s a strong, solid interest in the communities in teaching the visitors, and many of the artists show endless patience and enormous generosity. I’m constantly humbled by the generosity and understanding they show us.”

When Read began building her collection she learnt to trust her instincts and purchase works she was drawn to that were unappreciated by others at the time.

“I began collecting through the excitement of getting to know the artists, as friends and professionals. Then there was the joy of coming to some understanding of country, visiting lands with artists and cultural custodians and being told about intensely deep, communal and personal aspects of that land. The paintings elicit an emotional response and take me to known and unknown territory. I have made my collection available to tour in public exhibitions so that presented, documented artworks reach audiences who perhaps might not be able to visit the northwest.”

Helen’s approach to the art is not only emotional. She was once so overcome by four paintings by Makinti Napananka hanging in Papunya Tula Artists Gallery in Alice Springs that she had to lie down on the floor to get her breath back. “It was the beauty of the work that affected me,” explains Helen. “The intimate understanding of the landscape described with such poetry of colour. I could see the texture of the paint and fearlessness of its application. I read the uninhibited joy of hand and eye, brush and pigment, mind and heart working together with soul and country. I had flown over Makinti’s land west of the Macdonnell Ranges for years and there it was in all its layered beauty pulsing and living: that vast so-called empty land full of life, described in its complexities, corners and secrets.”

“I love Helen’s visceral response to Aboriginal art,” says Anthony Bourke, the former Director of Hogarth Galleries in Sydney and now Aboriginal Art Consultant to Shapiro Auctioneers, “it’s almost as if she wants to eat the painting! Her collection is one of the major private collections of Aboriginal art. She took a deep breath and realised the importance of the art early on. Also, her big contribution is that she made it possible for people like me to get to the communities more easily. She managed to facilitate our way through a minefield – forming deeper relationships and taking important ‘tastemakers’ into the communities. What an education it has been for people to meet the artists and understand the context in which the work is produced. She’s done a lot to educate people about Aboriginal art and has played a unique role and been a major player in lifting the profile of Aboriginal art to the status it enjoys today.”

For a forthcoming, as yet untitled, public exhibition Bourke has selected 30 works from the desert communities from Read’s collection based on their sheer beauty. “We want to show the work on many levels,” he explains. “We want people to have their breath taken away, even if they know nothing much about the art – to give people the most extraordinary visual experience. Then if people want more information that too will be available through extensive documentation and the artists expressing themselves.”

And it all began when, growing up in rural Somerset in the UK, a small Helen Read asked her Australian mother about the strange curved wooden object sitting on the mantelpiece in the living room. “My mother explained to me that it was a boomerang,” recalls Read, “and she told me about the Australian Aboriginal people. I looked at her and said ‘One day I’m going to Australia and I’m going to live with the Aboriginal people’.”

For more information on Didgeri Air Art Tours or Palya Art viewings held annually in Sydney and Melbourne, tel (08) 8948 5055, email art.tours@didgeri.com.au or visit www.didgeri.com.au. A Thousand Journeys can be viewed at Flinders University Art Museum, University Campus, Bedford Park, Adelaide, SA, until 2005.