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Over-time therapy for the Westerners: Aboriginal dreamings

(page 38)

Australian Aboriginal art that 40 years ago world did not know about, nor wanted to know, now is conquering the world and gains followers. Good artworks are highly sought-after, and art collectors even sign up in a queue to get them.

Being alive means being connected to everything

Somewhere far away, in Australian deserts, it is an early morning, and Aboriginal community art centre is still closed. Older artists have arrived though, and they are waiting. Some people arrived themselves, somebody who can not easily walk, has been brought by relatives. They have understood, that the art created by them, physically and morally helps survive themselves and their people, whereas the rest of the world receives such wanted aesthetic and emotional enjoyment that some people even sign in a row. Aboriginal *jukurrpa*, also called *dreamings*, that are being painted with acrylic colors on canvas, are being acquired by museums and art galleries, collectors, admirers of modern art and tourists.

When the art center opens, the artists will sit on floor in front of their started paintings and will continue to tell their *jukurrpa* – Aboriginal story about Earth's creation and people's connectedness to their ancestors and nature, about how the past is related to the present. Aborigines have always been closely connected to nature and their land. „The reason of life is to be a part of everything that exists, The fact that you are alive, connects you to the rest of everything that is being alive,“ says one of the most famous representatives of Australian Aboriginal culture Bob Randall. Aboriginal culture is about 40 000 years old and is being considered the oldest surviving culture in the world. *Jukurrpa* has traveled through these times from generation to generation, it lived in sand paintings, on rocks and people's bodies. The signs and iconography stood for a written word, therefore Aborigines passed the knowledge that was essential to survive in a desert, as well as the ancestors' power and energy over to their children. Today Aborigines combine the old culture with feelings and experience of today in their paintings.

Survived

In the context of Aboriginal art one can not escape talking about historical events that made Australian indigenous people almost extinct. During of a time period of 200 years there were attempts to get rid of

them, or assimilate and make similar to white people. They were killed, expelled from their ancestors' sacred sites, they were taken away the possibility to live like they had lived for thousands and thousands of years. To recover from the elimination plan of aborigines, most probably will never be possible. The lifestyle of white people is not fully acceptable for aborigines, because the voice of their blood speaks in a different language. On the other hand, the historical lifestyle they had, is no more possible because the environment has been fully changed. Therefore aborigines try to at least return to their sacred sites, to their land, in order to keep their traditions and knowledge, at the same time trying to keep up with modern time. Painting for the artists is a way to live independent and respectful life in an environment where they belong. It is a way not to exist from government support.

From sand to canvas

Until 1970.-ies nobody was really interested in Aboriginal drawings, except Aborigines themselves. They were fragile and had short lives because they were carried out on sand and bodies with colors made from natural ingredients. Most often, soil of different colors mixed with blood of kangaroos or emus. Only when a new art teacher from Sydney Geoffrey Bardon arrived at a community in the middle of Australia, the way of the art to the outer world started. Bardon came with acrylic colors and canvas. He was the one who for the first time showed how to make non-volatile drawings, and he encouraged Aborigines. In the beginning, being happy for the new technique, they painted with everything they found on everything they found. But when the first paintings were being sold, Aborigines changed the content and technique of their painting. They did not want to show their sacred sites and elements, therefore these were covered with dots. Although other techniques were also used and still are used in nowadays, mainly with dot painting aborigines gained the world attention and reputation.

Looking for the basic values

Admirers of the contemporary art might have heard about the Aboriginal art. „Once it has been seen, you either like it and later might become addicted, or you are not moved,“ says the owner of Aboriginal contemporary art gallery ArtKelch in Freiburg, Robyn Kelch. „I think today Europe and the western world is looking for a harmony in everything. Recently we have been involved in processes, that always demand faster, higher, further movement. However, any growth has its boundaries, and I think the western world is too much saturated with trying to reach always new accomplishments. People are tired. Or they see that what happens, is not healthy in a long time perspective. We are

longing for a deeper content, for a contact with basic values. As an example from Aboriginal culture, they had 220 languages and even more dialects, but there were none word for „time“.

It often happens that a person buys a painting, starts to acquire knowledge and gets to know more and more, discovers new meanings and sense.

„This is how the addiction emerges: the more a person gets to know about the Aboriginal art, the more the person wants to understand,“ says Robyn Kelch. Partly it is her experience as well. She and her husband Matthias „got addicted“ in 1996 while spending their honeymoon in Australia. In 2006 they founded a gallery ArtKelch in order to import and exhibit contemporary Aboriginal paintings.

A story over everything

People who like Aboriginal art, mostly are delighted about the artistic expression and emotionality, as well as the message being conveyed. A non-expert will see circles, stripes, semicircles and dots, but when hearing a story and understanding the symbols, it is possible to decode complex scenes. In majority cases from above as traditionally aborigines paint from a bird's perspective. Thus you get to know that circles stand for waterholes, stripes are trails from a waterhole to a waterhole, or may be sand dunes. Semicircles could be people, sitting around the fire, but small dots - bushtucker. Robyn Kelch says, „Aboriginal art could not exist from only form and color,“ that to her opinion could be perfectly possible for contemporary western art. „Although Aboriginal art looks like contemporary art, there is always a one more deeper level, and this level is a story.“

Alison and Peter Klein in Germany are significant collectors of Aboriginal art. They live close to Stuttgart. There are 1450 works of contemporary art in their collection in the private museum Kunstwerk, 300 of those are created by Aborigines. „Aboriginal art speaks to our emotions,“ says Peter Klein. „One of the principles how we pick the works for our collection is if we get goosebumps when we see the work. That means, our emotions are touched. Aboriginal art is very authentic and strong, the paintings are sincere and genuine. There is no chemistry or makeups. Aborigines put on canvas what they think, do or dream about, and we like this honesty and truthfulness.“

Outside the mainstream

For a couple of decades art institutions and their representatives discuss either contemporary Aboriginal art is „only ethnography“, or is it „art for the art's sake“, and where it could be placed on the world's art scene. „I think the artists' focus on the artistic expression is of the most importance. They feel like artists. They all have their own individual

signature and self-expression, which is not characteristic for ethnography. The experts can recognize the artistic signature and development of artists," says Robyn Kelch.

The true lovers and collectors of Aboriginal art don't wait. They follow the development of individual style of artists, awards nominations, gallery offers, what happens in Sotheby's, and they look for good artworks. Peter Klein says: „I think contemporary Aboriginal art market will always be small but important segment in the contemporary art world. It is small because the number of available artworks for the world market is comparatively small, and important collectors buy them quickly. For many other interested people there is simply not much left. And it is an important segment because it shows the art world that is outside the mainstream and creates its own direction.“

There was a real sensation in 2007 when the artwork called *Earth Creation* of Emily Kame Kngwarre was sold for more than 1 million dollars.

Ethics is important

With growing demand for Aboriginal paintings, the number of speculative and even criminal actions, as well as exploitation of aborigines also was growing. Using trust from Australian indigenous people who often do not understand how the western world operated, art dealers used to deceive aborigines. It often happened when a senior artist who was well acknowledged received some dollars, but his painting was later sold for a couple of thousands of dollars. Also expensive fakes can be found in the market. There have even been cases when artists have been stolen from their communities and locked in some city apartments to paint.

In order to protect the artists on one hand and on the other hand buyers could acquire the art reliably and safe, Aboriginal community art centres were founded. People live on their land, close to the sacred sites of their ancestors. They paint, getting inspired by their communities, with often four generations living together, as well as by traditional lifestyle and environment. The art centers are being managed by managers, usually white people or *white fella*, who have been hired by senior aborigines, and who help the artists with everything, starting from sandwich making to art selling and issuing the certificates. Today the division between ethically and unethically sourced art is of crucial significance. The market is quite small, and people know each other. If somebody has started to work unethically, the principled art world will turn away, and most probably there will be no chance to return.

The art is spreading

There are around 30 important art museums and galleries in Europe that are working ethically and exhibit contemporary Aboriginal paintings. Spreading the word about the art is so important for Australian indigenous people that 4 acknowledged artists Keith Stevens, Ginger Wilkilyiri, Yaritji Connely and Molly Nampitjinpa responded Europeans' invitation. They came from sunny Australian deserts to German city Freiburg with +11° temperature to tell about their art, sing their songs and dance ritual dances. In order to also see the audience they speak to with their works, and may be tell something that is left outside the paintings. „Painting for them is not only their only way to stay on their land,“ says Robyn Kelch. „It also helps them to raise their self confidence. They do work that brings money and helps the community. People who have been oppressed for the last 200 years, thus are reborn for a whole new life.“

Together with the artists (page 42)

An interview even with a help of a translator turns out to be impossible. An attempt to understand the artists without speaking their language becomes an interesting experience.

The four Australian Aboriginal artists who came to Germany Keith Stevens, Ginger Wikilyiri, Yaritji Connely and Molly Nampitjin Miller speak in one of 220 languages of Australian Aborigines, it is Pitjantjatjara. It sounds like spring water running over stones, and basically the language “lives” among „u“, „l“, „a“ and „r“ letters. The language is complex and difficult, and there are only few white people who can communicate in Pitjantjatjara. The art center managers know only the basics of the language and admit: in order to be understood, Aborigines speak to them in simple sentences, using the most simple words. Therefore it is impossible to find out answers on such questions as: “What is the first thing you do when you will be back home?” and “What you like the most in Germany?” The communication gap lies not only in the language, but also in thinking system differences. Aborigines don't have comparative degrees, because they do not compare things. For instance, they don't have better or worse paintings, they are all valued on the same level, and all are being respected equally, no matter if the financial value of the painting is 300 or 10 000 dollars.

We try to communicate

However, using Pitjantjatjara, the dictionary, English, and the language of emotions and signs, we get the information why they are in Germany, how they feel and what they like in their trip. They came to Germany to

tell their *jukurrpa* and to bring their culture to the world. Also, because they wanted to see the people who buy their paintings.

The art center managers tell that Ginger and Keith are especially proud and they like the appreciation they receive. Do they like in Germany? “Yes,” Ginger says. From the emotion that accompanies his “yes”, you would not doubt his words. However, the art centre managers note that in Aboriginal culture nobody would tell anything unpleasant to unknown people. Even if they would not like Germany, they would never reveal it. What is it exactly that they liked? “The church”, Ginger says about Freiburg Minster cathedral which was built in 13th century. “And chicken and chips,” he recalls. Some time later artists will tell that they also like the trees and plants, and the many cars. Besides, in a Freiburg market Ginger will buy a shining ring from a woman from Ghana.

As the artists are rather introvert and the language barrier sometimes seems to be unsurpassable, it takes a long time while the questions are being answered.

What becomes clear quite soon, the artists count days to be back at home. Do they miss home? Yes, the English word “homesick” the artists know. We can’t communicate well enough to understand what the artists miss the most. Basing on their experience, the managers say it could be the community people and land itself.

It is interesting how Ginger explains the colors he chooses. Being asked, which colors he likes, he writes on a paper in Pitjantjatjara: 1. Green. 2. Red. 3. Yellow. 4. Pink. We don’t get an answer which of the colors is the favourite one. He mentions green, but in reality when picking the colors, he would always first go for pink. Later Molly explains that she needs about 4-5 months to complete a painting of 150 x 180 m size.

Different natures

Within some time you can find out about different traits of personalities. Ginger Wikilyiri is the oldest of all, born around 1930. He is comparatively talkative, he is the only one of four artists who curiously walks through the ArtKelch gallery alone, pointing out the painters he personally knows. Later I will be explained that such recognition of works is a rather rare phenomenon. It is because there is no possessiveness in Aboriginal culture, as no one owns anything.

Everything simply exists and is available to all people. Only lately people start to pay attention to „a possession“. Therefore the artists live their *jukurrpa* on canvas, and after they finish it, they forget about it. What is being painted, loses the significance at the moment when it is being „passed to the world“. Ginger is quite open to talking, he sometimes makes jokes and offers to sing a song.

Keith Stevens is one of the senior leaders in his community. He was born around 1940, he is reserved, quiet, he often sits and observes other people. However, he is the one who decorates himself with emu feathers and traditional body paintings, and demonstrates a part of a ritual dance at the exhibition finissage. Molly Nampitjin Miller is 63 years old, and the whole trip is an emotional experience for her. She is not used to so many people around, this is the first time when she speaks to a large audience to tell about her painting. She speaks very quiet, almost in the ear of the translator. On another day she studies a world map to see where is Africa with many black people, where is Red Sea where they flew over, and where is Latvia, where „a writer for newspapers“ lives. Sometimes she holds art center manager's hand, and one could only think if she feels insecure, or because she likes it so, or may be for another reason. On another day when children from a local art school visits the gallery, she would hold a hand of a girl, sitting and holding. Yaritji Connelly is 65 years old, and she is also reserved and prefers sitting quiet and aside, rather than talking. What she genuinely thinks, is not even possible to presume.

The more time is being spent with the artists, the more talkative and friendly they become. Ginger even tries to teach me Pitjantjatjara. However, the art centre managers admit that even after many years while they helped the Aborigines to build the art centre and now they run it, they could not call the relationship as a close relationship. They are colleagues. Aborigines keep the distance and space where the white people can not enter.