

Palya Art & Didgeri Air Art Tours Newsletter October 2006

Twenty years ago this year I registered Didgeri Air Art Tours with the Department of Fair Trading and think a few reflections might be timely as I'm often asked what do I do, then how did I start doing it. I hope the next few passages will help explain. Looking back, our combined journeys are entwined with increasing awareness around the world of Australia's Indigenous art and culture, improved communications technology, and the growing up of another generation.

I started 'Didgeri' because, in 1985, I had been working in Kintore - 600 kms. west of Alice Springs - as a nursing sister and midwife for the Pintupi Homelands Health Service. With a loan of a trusty C180 aircraft - "Tango Tango Whiskey" - we could reach western desert outstations by air. Little did I realise I'd see conditions far far worse in the Northern Territory and Western Australia than I had seen in Nigeria, not far from the Biafran war zone, where I'd nursed in 1977.

Having initially trained in fine art in England, I had put aside my passion for painting to qualify as a nursing sister, keen to be with people and travel. I joined my cousin, a Doctor of tropical medicine, in West Africa. But as the Saharan Hamatan wind and rain cut off roads, I returned to the UK to learn to fly to maintain access to remote areas. My first solo flight was from Bristol, in 1978, the year I emigrated to my Mother's country, Australia, to train as a midwife. I was going to need both these new skills.

By chance meetings and circumstance I was steered and pulled toward central Australia by Pintupi and other friends who were establishing the fledgling communities of Walungurru (Kintore) and Kiwirrkurra. What an enormous privilege it was, and is, getting to know people as I worked and lived in the new homeland communities. Friends 'grew me up' explaining familial, totemic and physical connectedness, whilst I worked in our tragically under resourced clinic. Children were dying of malnutrition, vaccinations were way behind, or missed entirely, and trauma, sickness and disease was rampant. Cheerful, sometimes sombre, local flight companions would point out physical and non-physical landscapes, so inseparable to existence, as we flew between clinics - sometimes detouring over country soul wrenchingly unseen in years. I was oriented flying low over vast tracts of rhythmic country by looking, looking, being taught to see. This was before GPS, before the World Aeronautical Charts became more accurate. Frequently my passengers from the communities hadn't flown before, but one would never have guessed, given people's relaxed joy and obvious, pin point, sense of place in the vast western deserts.



Meanwhile Papunya Tula Artists were going from strength to strength. I came to appreciate the aerial perspective of the paintings which were being created; their cultural - intellectual and spiritual communication. But the lack of basic resources, the unmanageable - and unimaginable - work load, which still takes its toll in communities today, was too much. I burnt out in six months. I felt there had to be a way to reveal, in mutually respectful circumstances, the conditions under which desert people were forced to live and work. And to open to those who might use their influence, the opportunity to come and meet Traditional Owners, thereby help improve the dreadful conditions.

Hence I started Didgeri Air Art Tours. It was 1986. But with the world recession, the national pilot strike and little interest in Indigenous art or communities, it took seven years - including going back to my own paint brushes - before the first art tour set out. Meanwhile I paid for a researcher at Monash University to find out all who had shown or collected Aboriginal Art, or had an Aboriginal art gallery, in the world. I bought smart shoes and a sort of suit and walked London, New York and Paris. People from abroad were interested in coming in to meet Australian Indigenous artists, visit their country. Places such as Balgo Hills, Kalumburu and Elcho Island were hardly heard of. Art centres, where they existed, were often set up in small makeshift areas. Typewriters pounded out painting documents and photographs of art works took two weeks to develop from Balgo with rolls of negative film flying out and colourful prints flown in on the weekly mail plane. The first group exhibitions were being held through a handful of city galleries. The touring exhibition 'Aratjara' opened in Dusseldorf. It was 1993.

Relatively few books on Aboriginal art and culture had been written by this time. It gave me great pleasure, flying visitors from Australia and abroad out to far reaching communities to meet creators of sublime art who spoke multiple languages, with English Australian not necessarily being the first language, if spoken at all. Visitors to the art centres, and increasing numbers of exhibitions, not only helped cross cultural understanding but brought a degree of economic income. Third and fourth world living conditions were exposed. Differences in language groups, societies, landscape, painting styles and mediums began to be understood by a broader audience.

Artworks on consignment were brought back to the communities where they sold more readily to these new visitors. Art centres, often the only source of independence or where use of a vehicle or telephone could be accessed, became administratively and economically stronger. Training in the 'Money Story' continued; pricing, percentages and payments becoming more skilfully managed by artists and families whose complex lives were, are, not necessarily based on a numerical system; thereby being vulnerable to exploitation.

In 1994 I registered Palya Art as a separate entity as people were asking me for artwork that I would select. Palya Art has evolved where I now assist with private and public collections and hold a show of current paintings, sculptures and weaving from the art centres once a year in Melbourne (November) and Sydney (March), and periodically, by appointment, in Darwin.

At first I supported paying costs for Didgeri Air Art Tours with my midwifery duties, working in Melbourne and Broome, until moving to Darwin in 1996. I received a commission on sales from several of the community art centres which has been a great support. I also assisted 'Didgeri' by working as a pilot. I loved flying multiple aircraft types for often colourful

characters. I would fly to far flung places on various missions reaching out across Kimberley and far north Australia.

On my travels across Arnhem Land, Stone Country, estuary plains, Kimberley, Northern & Central Deserts, I made a collection of artwork as a form of diary. Through Sydney University's Tin Sheds Gallery a show of sixty of these beautiful works from twelve different areas toured to new audiences in Regional Galleries and Universities in NSW, Victoria and South Australia titled 'A Thousand Journeys'. It was 1998.

Gradually Didgeri Air Art Tours became known, bookings increased and I swapped my long time single engined aeroplane friend "Foxtrot Lima Uniform" - a C185 tail dragger, who could delicately fly in and out of short bumpy strips - for a twin engined aircraft, "Delta Mike Golf" a Piper Aztec.

Years flew by with the challenge of logistics, communications, itineraries, mail-outs, strategic supply drops (especially aviation fuel, food, bedding), maintaining pilot ratings and aircraft, as we traversed the north west of Australia with visitors from all over the world - and increasingly from Australia. People with different interests and professions, independent and often thoughtful, would leave remote communities with heightened respect for Traditional Owners, artists and land. And with more questions than they came with.

Artists continued to paint up storms of aesthetic beauty whilst imparting information, creating the unseeable - land, beings and lore interwoven with human sense. By now computers had well and truly arrived in most community art centres. Communication and documentation processes became easier. City galleries were holding more shows, especially for solo artists, and prices for artwork steadily rose. But health conditions for both the individual and community remained absolutely dire as we rolled into the 21st Century.

As prices have increased so has interest from art dealers to work with artists away from art centres. Pressure for resources remain immense for the artists, especially for food and shelter and for transport needed for cultural activities. Health, housing and education is still drastically amiss, as is funding for art centre resources such as staffing, 'money story' and governance training, buildings, equipment, research and linguistics.

And still the generosity, good will and humour of artists and Traditional Owners remains abundant. Our art tours come, and go. Artists, who were initially acutely shy, often disappearing, have increasingly welcomed our visits, appreciating the adherence to protocol, coming to teach us about country, language, skin, and areas of significance. Senior men and women explain, with levity, often in language, deeply meaningful details - a huge honour. So many times I see the 'penny drop' with visitors as they relate paintings they've seen to country as we then softly cruise over lands rich in space and beauty, held still in time.

With this long boom in interest in Australian art and culture, artists are achieving higher recognition, and prices, with, I believe, a long way to go. Art centres, still on shaky ground with labile funding, continue to play an important role not only in supporting artists, their family and community, but as a mutually acceptable entity enabling respectful exchange whilst, among other things, western thought and language finds it's tongue. And action.

In 2000 I started to employ more help, and am most appreciative for the years of sustained support I've received. 'Didgeri' began chartering other aircraft and pilots in 2003 as the workload increased, though we still keep the visits small, low key and where there is benefit all round. In 2005 I started my own aircraft charter company.

I look forward to continuing to support widespread art centres and artists into the future. I hope communication and communication technology, continues to improve, especially the web for health conferencing and education . We hope the government applies holistic full scale attention and support to improve life in Indigenous communities. We are a Nation of intense riches. It's been exciting to see how Regional, State and National collections of Indigenous art have expanded, with some wonderfully powerful shows open to the public although acquisition budgets often remain very limiting. Art treasures, eagerly sought abroad, find their way around the world. Babies I delivered in Walungurru have had babies themselves; there's a new clinic there now. Through huge effort, public and private donations, a renal dialysis unit is operating in Kintore. People, ill from poor diet and living conditions, can have dialysis and remain with family, on all important country. If anyone can help support this valuable health programme, donations are always very welcome: e-mail wdnwpt@bigpond.net.au

Best Wishes, Helen