

KIMBERLEY ON CANVAS

At the meeting of 7 April 1999, our speaker was Belinda Carrigan, the General Manager of Collections for Heytesbury Pty Ltd, focusing primarily on The Holmes à Court Collection. Belinda has been with the company for four years and, prior to this, was Exhibition Coordinator with the Perth Institute for Contemporary Art for five years. As a community service she provides professional advice assisting with building a relevant art collection for Government House of Western Australia. She is also on the Visual Arts Advisory Committee for the West Australian Academy at Edith Cowan University.

The Holmes à Court Collection holds in excess of 5,000 pieces of art with several distinct focuses. Approximately one-third is Aboriginal art ranging from early barks and artefacts to late contemporary acrylic paintings on canvas. Another major focus is works on paper and includes early exploration engravings and important drawings and watercolours from all periods and the balance covers paintings from the late 19th Century to the work of contemporary artists.

The content of Belinda's talk was framed around selected contemporary artists who have lived and worked in the Kimberley region. Using slides of Aboriginal art works in the Holmes à Court Collection in association with slides of the region, there was a specific emphasis on relationships to the land, Aboriginal spirituality and the common tenet of ancient traditions in forming a living culture.

The 1980s were the boom years of Aboriginal art, especially from the community at Warmun (Turkey Creek), whose members generally originated from the Great Sandy Desert. The Warmun Community came into existence in 1974 after the introduction of equal pay led to widespread loss of employment in the cattle industry. Mary Macha encouraged artists from the Warmun community to use ochre and other natural materials and became Rover Thomas' sole agent for some considerable time, still holding much of their work. Now, of course, many artists use acrylics and canvases. Rover Thomas, born in 1935, always retained a strong connection to the desert in his work. He has become well known throughout the world and following his death the value of his work appreciated significantly.

Even though art from the Warmun community is most significant for the use of natural materials, work from the Fitzroy Crossing community is also important, the members of this community having been drawn north to the cattle stations for work. Artists of note from Fitzroy Crossing are Peter Skipper and David Downs. Peter uses abstract images to depict sandhill country and landscapes of sea, sand and clouds. David Downs has done carvings on pearl shells in the Broome area. He became a Christian later in life and this influenced the subject of some of his work.

Belinda showed slides of many paintings and gave interpretations of their meaning, although there may well be deeper, spiritual meanings which the artists choose not to reveal. There were also slides of the artists preparing their ochre, grinding it into a paste for use in painting and on their own bodies for adornment. They also used charcoal from their fires, chalk and kaolin from the ground, and sometimes non-natural products, in the case of Rover Thomas, such as toothpaste, sugar and black boot polish have been used.

During question time, Belinda mentioned that the Holmes à Court Collection is presently housed at the property at Keysbrook, but a dedicated art gallery will be opened in the new corporate office being built in East Perth. Nearly 2,000 of the works are on cyclic loan, some touring and others in exhibitions.

A question was asked about the earnings of the artists. It was evident that in the 1980s exploitation was widespread and there were buying sprees at the various communities, but now the boom has subsided, there is a raised awareness to the rights of the artists and many dealers and artists protect their interests. The auction system damaged the artists tremendously but there are many checks and balances today, and copyright provides protection on the use of images for 50 years following the death of the artist.

Kevin thanked Belinda for her most interesting and visually exciting talk and we applauded in the usual manner.

Daphne Choules Edinger