

FAIR EXCHANGE

the rise of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art fairs

■ Tim Acker and Tod Jones with maps by Fiona Henham

“**F**or me inspiration ... for myself, and it made me think a lot when I went around and look[ed] at everything different, everyone has different ways of doing their art.”¹

“My son rang me and said mum, you better sit down. I've got some good news. And when he told me I said you gotta be joking! Are you reading the email right?’ and he goes ‘mum, he had a look at their work and he chose yours’. That is a proud day for me.”²

“Revealed was great, I was glad to be a part of it, the symposiums were excellent and it was great to catch up with other art centres and interesting talks on how they are going and running, I got a lot of knowledge and great information out of the whole trip.”³

“The art fairs are a really important place for artists, art centres and the market; because we're all so remote, it's a rare chance for artists and art workers to be part of the ‘business of art’ and for the network to come together and build relationships. Art fairs are where all the different strands of the industry really meet.”⁴

Change in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art sector is rarely straightforward and recently, changes have come fast. Major shifts in policy, a falling market and a complex political environment have created uncertainty for artists, their communities and the commercial sectors. Yet characterisations of an art market in decline or claims of losing the ‘last generation’ of artists ignore the many activities, initiatives and responses that regenerate and reinvigorate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. One of these developments, and now a feature of the sector, is a national roster of art fairs, mixing commercial, cultural and creative priorities that have opened up a new zone for artists, their art centres and audiences. In contrast to the gallery

model of bringing art to the buyers, the art fairs draw buyers and artists together, along with families, managers, curators, commentators, administrators and politicians. The art fairs are about exchange – of ideas, money, objects, practices and value.

In 1991, the first art fair Desert Mob started in Alice Springs. Between 2007 and 2009 three new events were created, aiming, at least in part, to replicate the success of Desert Mob, the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF), the Revealed: Emerging Aboriginal Artists Showcase in Perth, and the Cairns Indigenous Arts Festival (CIAF). These three fairs began as the global financial crisis triggered a downturn in sales that saw art centre sales decline by over 52% (between 2007 and 2011).⁵ The sustained fall in sales has hit every part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market, with gallery closures and an auction market that has been reset to 2003 levels. The scale of this market shift foregrounds the importance of the art fairs and the way the commerce of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art has changed.

Art centre participation in the art fairs shows their growing importance. The development of the art fairs can be seen on the accompanying maps: from 13 art centres in 1991, to 24 in 2002, and 84 in 2013. Figures from 2011 present the clearest picture of the reach of the art fairs, with over 32,000 visitors and total sales of more than \$1.7 million. The largest growth in art centre participation was in 2009 when CIAF began and DAAF participation expanded substantially. The areas that benefit most from the fairs are the established art centres in Central Australia (particularly around Alice Springs) that access both Desert Mob and DAAF, while Western Desert art centres generally attend Revealed in Perth as well as one or more Northern Territory fair. In 2013, 51 % of participating art centres were based in the Northern Territory compared to 26 per cent from Western Australia and 15 per cent from



Yarliyil Art Centre manager Jeannette Swan selling a painting.



Jillinbirri Weavers L-R: Toni Roe, Elaine Moncrieff, Marjorie Winmar, Avy Robinson from Carnarvon at Revealed.



Queensland. Queensland art centres generally only attend CIAF and there are approximately 10 Western Australian art centres that only attend Revealed. For artists from these centres, CIAF and Revealed are a unique opportunity to access multi-layered professional experiences. Together these events and the annual National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) in Darwin create focal points for the arts calendar large enough to draw national coverage and international visitors.

The four art fairs have different histories and their own methodologies. Desert Mob is a collaboration between Desart (the peak body for art centres in central Australia) and the Araluen Cultural Precinct in Alice Springs. Participation has grown to 32 art centres in 2013. Desert Mob's curatorial approach asks each art centre to choose a maximum of ten works to be exhibited, thus building a large exhibition of over 300 pieces, which are presented and sold) at the Araluen Arts Centre. Desert Mob also includes a Saturday morning art market where art centres sell directly to the public, professional development activities for artworkers run by Desart, and, since 2005, a public symposium where art centres showcase their stories and innovations. To be part of Desert Mob, art centres need to be members of Desart.

The Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF) began as an initiative of Maningrida Arts and Culture in response to the changing structure of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA). DAAF is a three-day 'expo' of art centres and is the only truly national Indigenous art fair, with attendees from all regions, including urban art centres. DAAF is held in the Darwin Convention Centre, where art centres display and sell works, with concurrent workshops, presentations and professional development, organised by the Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists' (ANKAAA – the art centre peak body for the top end of the NT and WA). Art centre participation has grown from 17 in 2007 to 44 in 2013. The governance of DAAF is managed by an independent foundation.

The Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) began in 2009 on the back of the success of Desert Mob and DAAF. Unlike Desert Mob and DAAF, it is part of a government development initiative for northern Queensland. In 2007, the Bligh government announced the Backing Indigenous Arts program that included funding for CIAF, which is run by Arts Queensland. CIAF consists of three components: an art fair, workshops and symposium. It is akin to a trade show for Queensland Indigenous art; exhibitors can only sell the



Sid Bruce from Pormpuraaw Art and Cultural Centre adding the final touches to his work, Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 2011. Image courtesy CIAF.

work of Queensland born or based Aboriginal or Torres Straits artists and participants apply to, and are selected by, the CIAF artistic director. Unlike Desert Mob and CIAF, exhibitors include commercial galleries, creating a mixed commercial and community experience. The size of CIAF creates opportunities for other groups to participate, (such as national Indigenous theatre and textile forums). CIAF's visitor numbers peaked in 2011 (over 21,000) and sales in 2011 and 2012 remained steady (\$580-600,000). The fair survived but did not completely escape the cutbacks of the Newman government. In 2013, a scaled down version, *CIAF Presents* retained some elements of CIAF, and later that year the Queensland government announced \$1.6 million funding for the next two years.⁶

Revealed—Emerging Indigenous Artists Showcase is a biennial visual arts event held in Perth since 2008 for Western Australian Aboriginal artists and art centre staff. Revealed consists of three components: an exhibition, an art market, and professional development. Unlike the other three events,



Desert Mob Exhibition 2013. © Desart.



Desert Mob Art Market 2013, Alice Springs. © Desart.



Mangkaja Arts at the Revealed Marketplace, L-R: Terry Murray, Jennifer Dickerson, Graham Lands.



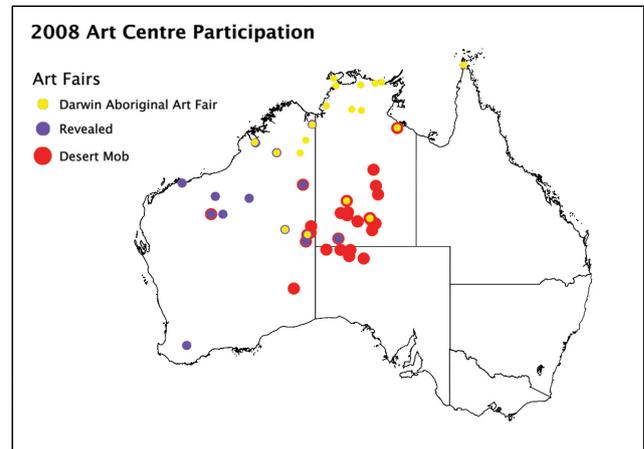
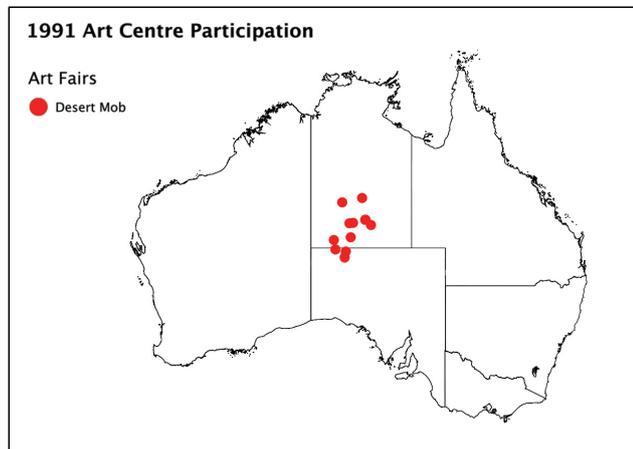
The Mornington Island Dancers at the CIAF Opening Party. Image courtesy CIAF.

the Revealed exhibition is only for emerging artists, with an emphasis on participation and growing professional skills and confidence. In 2013, Revealed expanded its program to include a half-day symposium where artists and artworkers shared their stories, and the art market was moved into Perth's cultural precinct in the CBD, leading to a four-fold increase in visitors to over 4000.

While the histories of the art fairs are all different, they have similar central themes – enabling artists to overcome professional isolation and meet their peers, to link artists and audiences more directly, to increase sales and to showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creativity in a broad and inclusive way. Evaluation reports for CIAF and Revealed highlight that learning and encouragement are key attractions for artists, and this leads to productive periods after the

events.⁷ The fairs also present opportunities to artists for self-representation rather than representation through third parties. For artists the fairs facilitate and encourage personal interactions with audiences, and thus genuine dialogues and the wider social benefits and understanding arising from them. The symposiums are also increasingly used as a platform for the voices and experiences of remote artists, and there is an enthusiastic audience who want to hear from the producers of Indigenous art.

The art fairs are also changing. All of them have been evaluated in the last three years and are exploring governance structures that allow them greater independence and to build relationships with commercial and philanthropic organisations, while retaining some funding links to government. The art fairs are also looking to diversify,



Maps showing Art Centre participation in Art Fairs. Mapping by Fiona Henham.



Tjanpi Desert Weavers talking at Desert Mob Symposium, 2013. © Desart.

expanding their programs with music and dance in particular.

The rhythms of the year for many remote artists and art centres are now increasingly linked to the timing of the four art fairs. Tactical decisions are made about which art fair, or combination of art fairs works for (or is affordable to) each art centre. For some smaller art centres, particularly in Queensland, the choice is a decisive one, with the art fair generating the majority of annual sales. While galleries and exhibitions remain crucial, the art fairs augment these sales, and often to new audiences, who are attracted to the personal interactions possible at these events. A growing number of artists from remote art communities are enthusiastically taking up these opportunities for a richer, more detailed engagement with audiences, with professional development opportunities, with new art and other artists. ■

- 1 Artist talking about their experiences at CIAF, from Arts Queensland, *Cairns Indigenous Art Fair evaluation report*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, 2011, p11.
- 2 Western Australian Aboriginal artist chosen for Revealed: Emerging Aboriginal Artists Showcase.
- 3 Arts Centre Manager commenting on Revealed 2013.
- 4 Art Centre Manager commenting on DAAF and Desert Mob.
- 5 Office for the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, *At the heart of art: A snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations in the visual arts sector*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra 2012.
- 6 Arts Queensland. 'CIAF Presents an all-star event'. *Arts Update*, August 2013, p9.
- 7 Tracker Development *Revealed 2011 Evaluation Report*, Tracker Development, Perth 2011; Arts Queensland *Cairns Indigenous Art Fair evaluation report*, Queensland Government, Brisbane 2011.

