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**Tribute to Lauraine Diggins by Mr Adrian Newstead OAM
founding Director Cooe Art**



I am honoured to have been asked by Lauraine and her family to share with you, my recollections and knowledge of the relationships Lauraine shared with Aboriginal people; and to acknowledge the respect in which she held all the Elders and cultural custodians across this great continent.

I guess Lauraine was in her early 40s when we first met in 1989. She'd brought what was at that time, the most extraordinary exhibition of Aboriginal art to Sydney. In spite of the Sydney - Melbourne thing, I was immediately drawn in by her winning nature, personal charm, depth of knowledge, and refined eye.

Lauraine's exhibition, *A Myriad of Dreaming – Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art*, presented a cornucopia of treasures from what is today considered to be the golden period of the Aboriginal art movement.

It was held in a large contemporary design centre, and sent a very specific message to those, like me, who had been showing Aboriginal artworks as ethnographic cultural artefacts to that time. *A Myriad of Dreaming: Twentieth Century Aboriginal Art*, was a major survey exhibition, accompanied by an extensive catalogue. The forward was written by none other than Bob Edwards, the former director of the SA Museum and then director of the Museum of Victoria. There were authoritative essays by Dr Luke Taylor on Bark painting, Geoffrey Bardon on the origins of Desert painting and Djon Mundine on the then nascent Urban Aboriginal art movement. The exhibition itself explored the rich cultural traditions of Kakadu, the origins of Western Desert Art, Hermannsburg

watercolours, East Kimberley paintings, and the first works to come out of the APY lands and Utopia in the Eastern Desert. Alongside them were the works of Lin Onus, Gordon Bennett, Trevor Nicholls and Karen Casey, at the outset of their distinguished careers.

It's worth remembering, I think, that Emily Kngwarreye painted her first canvas in 1989, the year of this exhibition, and Rover Thomas was barely on the art world's radar. It was to be another five years before Sotheby's would hold its first auction devoted exclusively to Aboriginal art. Forty-five of the highest prices paid for Indigenous Australian artworks were still created by Albert Namatjira.

Urban Aboriginal artists were yet to enjoy renown in mainstream art circles. Yet young Aboriginal artists could be introduced at one of Lauraine's exhibitions to art world luminaries like artists Albert Tucker, or Fred Williams or the directors of important state and national institutions.

Over the succeeding years many of the paintings in this landmark exhibition were sold to institutions and have gone on to become iconic examples of the Aboriginal Art Movement's golden period. Others have re-sold over the three decades since to establish artist's auction records that stand to this day.

With Sotheby's imprimatur during the 1990s serious contemporary art collectors and galleries began their halting recognition of Aboriginal fine art. Yet, years before Aboriginal art became widely accepted in mainstream galleries, Lauraine was one of a handful of dealers that promoted Aboriginal art and put great artworks in front of serious art collectors and institutions championing them as works of National significance. She placed artworks in public collections, for all the nation to enjoy and did whatever she could to support this activity through her own philanthropic donations.

Lauraine was always concerned about ethical issues in the presentation and sale of art. When, in 1990, I made the first of several attempts to initiate an Aboriginal Art Dealer's Association in order to address ethical issues emerging in the Indigenous art trade, Lauraine was supportive from the outset. Our attempts came to fruition in 1996, when we managed to broker a meeting of more than 50 Indigenous art dealers to coincide with the opening of the first retrospective exhibition of Emily Kngwarreye's works at the Queensland Art Gallery. It took but a call from Lauraine and Doug Hall agreed that the meeting could take place in his boardroom. When the Association was finally incorporated in 1998 Lauraine joined as a foundation member, and, as late as 2017, she was an advisor to the Board.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Lauraine presented Aboriginal art in exhibitions and art fairs internationally including Hong Kong in 1994 and Milan in 2001. At ArtParis in 2004 - 2006, the Moscow World Fine Art Fair in 2008 and October Gallery in London. Only those who own and run private galleries can understand the enormous financial and personal effort that goes in to championing Australian art on the international stage.

I would like to give you all an inkling of Lauriane's passion and commitment to Aboriginal people through her philanthropic activities.

Lauraine was an active and generous supporter of the Aboriginal Benefits Foundation. Since it was established in 2006 it has raised more than \$1 million for Aboriginal health,

education and community development projects. At the ABF fundraising dinner at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, Lauraine and I conspired to be the winning bidders on a wilderness fishing trip to Bremmer Island off Yirrkala in NE Arnhem Land. On that adventure with Michael and Lauraine, I personally witnessed the deep affection they hold for Aboriginal people, especially those in distress and facing hardship. Whether it was with young people choosing isolation on a remote island over time in jail, or later on the same adventure planting fruit trees alongside every leaking tap at Camel Camp, a remote outstation on the Utopia lands,

The following year she established the Australian Unity Nutrition Support Program to ensure fresh fruit and vegetables were available to the Anmatjerre and Alyawerre residents at Camel Camp, an outstation on the Utopia lands.

Lauraine showed in the most practical of ways that just because things were bad, or people were impoverished and the shop had no fruit, that did not mean that it had to stay that way.

On another trip we visited Gloria Petyarr at her desert home. Lauraine had negotiated with Hermes to have a number of Gloria's bush leaf designs reproduced as silk scarves. After presenting the six different versions, along with her first payment, we spent the morning taking photographs of Gloria and all of her delighted female relatives wearing the scarves in the desert country that inspired them and their beautiful artworks. Lauraine wore one of these scarves to the ceremony at which she was presented with her OAM.

Times like this are indelibly etched in my memory. Swagging out on the gibber; yarning with Warramirri leader Terry Yumbulul on the veranda of his home on Ski Beach in near Yirrkala; sleeping in a wilderness camp; standing with Lauraine, in the foyer of the AGNSW for the announcement of finalists in the Wynne Prize and at the SH Irvine during the Salon de Refuse with Cowboy Loy, Elizabeth Kunoth and Genevieve Loy proudly beside us.

These memories exemplify Lauraine. They are indicative of the strong relationships she cultivated with Australian Aboriginal people and their communities. Her involvement with the artists of Utopia most especially Coyboy, Elizabeth, and their daughter Genevieve, as well as the Ngale sisters Poly, Kathleen and Angelina was ongoing and will continue into the future through Nerida and Ruth and the Gallery that will always bear Lauraine's name.

Today you will hear about Lauraine's many achievements but for me her passion and vision was exemplified by her philanthropy, her generosity, and her determination to make a created a better future for Indigenous Australians through her role on the board of i-LEAP, the Indigenous Leadership, Excellence and Achievement Program.

The Australian Art world and the Aboriginal art world in particular has lost a true champion with the passing of Lauraine Diggins OAM. I personally have lost a wonderful ally, an invaluable sounding board, a wise and experienced adviser. But most especially, a trusted and much-loved friend.