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AUGUST 17, 2009 3:24AM

**The boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous art are becoming more porous, writes Nicolas Rothwell,
News Corp Australia Network**

EARLY in last year's dry season, abstract artist Ildiko Kovacs set out on a journey she had long yearned to make, up to Fitzroy Crossing in the far-off Kimberley.

For three weeks, she haunted the Mangkaja Art Centre's studio shed, and spent her days there with two desert painters she revered, Wakartu Cory Surprise and Jukuja Dolly Snell.

Kovacs watched them; they watched her. The three women began to work together, separate, yet in tandem. Not quite collaboration, it grew into something much more precious: artists from two distinct worlds finding in each other's company a mutual inspiration, a creative bridge.

On one side, Kovacs, a painter of Hungarian descent, a woman for whom each brushstroke is an intuition, pondered and brought through a maze of hesitations. On the other, Wakartu and Jukuja, two senior women born in the fastness of the Great Sandy Desert, painting their country with quiet, grand resolve.

The fruit of these painting sessions is on view at Darwin's Raft Artspace. The gallery walls are bright with colour fields and strongly blocked-out forms of light and and dark. Eight works on paper and a single canvas by Kovacs hang alongside two pieces by Jukuja and 14 by Wakartu.

How to interpret this display? Is it a new kind of cross-cultural group show? Are these pieces in some sense an act of joint creation?

Raft's gallerist, Dallas Gold, whose innovative Paint show of last year brought together intensely realised works by four artists, two indigenous, two non-indigenous, has a strong interest in the border zone where the distinct traditions of north Australia meet.

"We're looking at an interchange between artists here," he says as he puts the last touches to the new exhibition.

"We're seeing artists bouncing off each other, being renewed; it's the same thing you'd see in any kind of workshop or studio where creative people mix and share ideas."

Kovacs has also been a long-time explorer of the frontier between Aboriginal and

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non-Aboriginal art. She was strongly affected by seeing her own work on the walls last year in Paint alongside canvases by desert artists Makinti Napanangka and Eubena Nampitjin. When the chance came to spend time in Fitzroy Crossing, she felt a long trajectory was reaching its natural end.

For years she had been inspired by the elusive shapes and tones of northern art; not just the work of desert women, but Gija artists too, from the range country, old stockmen such as Paddy Bedford, then the master painter of the east Kimberley, whose works seemed strikingly close to her tradition and her style in art.

Many art-world luminaries have drawn comparisons between Rover Thomas and Mark Rothko or late period Emily Kngwarreye and late period Willem de Kooning. But the similarities of look only serve to highlight the differences in intent.

Gold is clear about this. "Kovacs is a Western artist who wants an emotional response to her work," he says. "She's painting from sources of inspiration, and in this case that inspiration includes her responses to other artists. That's not what we see with the desert women.

"Wakartu and Jukuja, when they paint, are mapping country. They become conduits for the knowledge of country that they hold. And by now the two of them, after painting for so long, have become highly proficient artists and in the finest nuances of their work we can gain a sense of the great love they have for their subject."

If the artworks from the two traditions appear cognate, does that mean they affect the viewer in similar ways? Are we in the same domain of response before one of Kovacs's rich, deep-toned fields of colour and the scar-like sandhills, similar in hue, that form Wakartu's constant subject?

Traditional artists no longer seem quite as strange and distant from the mainstream as they once did, and this is because of two linked changes. There has been an evolution in the way wider Australian audiences regard Aboriginal art-making; and there is also a change in the degree to which Western players in the art market acknowledge their own influence upon the works they oversee and buy and sell.

The first trend is plain, and has straightforward effects. Once desert and Top End artists are recognised and collected for their particular styles, and come to be seen and studied as individuals with distinct biographies, so it seems more natural to draw comparisons between traditional and contemporary artists.

The second trend, subtler, grows from the conditions in which remote community art is made. It has long been the pattern that art co-ordinators in the bush are themselves aspiring artists. That goes back as far as Geoff Bardon, in the first days of painting at Papunya, and beyond, to the 1930s, when Albert Namatjira's first inspirer at Hermannsburg mission was landscape artist Rex Battarbee.

Even at the dawn, then, indigenous art made for foreign eyes was touched by Western influences: a word here, an expressed preference there. This has now advanced to the stage where workshops staged by outsiders on how best to paint for the present conditions and tastes of the market are familiar features of a remote community artist's life. The art bears the shadowy reflection of its connoisseurs and collectors. Bathed in this glow, it seems more familiar, less the product of a separate world: traditional painters emerge as contemporaries, people one can work with.

Until recently, of course, the taboos against Westerners involving themselves in any way in indigenous art were strong. Those taboos gained their urgent force in the 80s, in part as a reaction to the collaborative paintings made by Sydney artist Tim Johnson during his frequent visits to Papunya community. Johnson's work of the time formed the subject of a recent show at the Art Gallery of NSW, Painting Ideas, and it is hard, today, to see why controversy attended them, so plainly are they cultural tributes, made in a spirit of strong affection.

At the time, though, Johnson and other artists walking down the road of postmodern appropriation found themselves under heavy critique. The core of the dispute was the claim that dotting and desert symbols should be viewed as cultural markers: things

Westerners should refrain from committing to paint.

Time passed; the financial value of traditional Aboriginal art rose. New problems such as forgery and carpetbagging came, inevitably, to the fore. Concerns over appropriation faded away but it was still almost unthinkable for a modern artist to consider overt collaboration with a traditional painter.

It was only with the emergence of fresh critical responses to indigenous art, stressing the commonalities between its visual language and modern abstract painting, that attitudes shifted once again.

Perhaps the key event was Talking About Abstraction, a 2004 group show at Sydney's Ivan Dougherty Gallery that hung traditional painters such as George Tjungurrayi and Bedford alongside Western contemporary artists, including Kovacs.

In the same year, at remote Warmun in the north, art centre co-ordinator Jonathan Kimberley embarked on an ambitious collaboration with Gija artist Patrick Mung Mung. Kimberley went on to pursue this creative experiment with other indigenous contacts, first in Tasmania, and most recently at the Kayili art centre, deep in the Gibson Desert.

Similar collaborations and experiments in mutual art-making or co-operative print-making are being tried elsewhere. The barrier between Aboriginal artist and art worker seems increasingly porous, and the trend towards joint exhibitions that show indigenous and non-indigenous art together is also clear.

This is the background to the new Raft Artspace show, which is most carefully subtitled, "Works from a paint workshop". Gold makes an initial, modest argument for the project.

"I think it's a valid thing that artists respond to each other's work," he says, and then unfurls the full scope of his logic: influence is everywhere.

"This gallery is itself a response to the Aboriginal art movement, an amazing thing that's happening around us. As long as Western artists aren't copying someone else's visual language, it seems natural to me that we respond to that movement, and that our eyes are changed by what we see. It's a two-way process. Indigenous artists themselves have been responding for three decades to outsiders coming in."

The consequences of collaboration, the results, are the key. Surprise's work after Kovacs's stay at Mangkaja took on a new, experimental quality: her designs became looser, her colours much more varied.

Kovacs, for her part, had never thought of showing the works she made during her Fitzroy visit. The time with the artists had been enough for her; she was full of joy at being there. She left all her work behind in the studio.

Gold, who had facilitated her trip, and knew her work well, asked to see them. They were grand, and mysterious, and full of lustrous depth; they looked oddly like early Ivan Kliun or Kazimir Malevich.

He suggested a joint show. He included not just the original works on paper but some new canvases by Wakartu.

"I'm just putting forward the possibility," he says, "that there is something Western artists and indigenous artists from traditional backgrounds have in common -- that there's something we share in common as human beings, and that these works belong in dialogue. I'm inviting that discussion; the works are in connection on the gallery walls."

The idea is much in the air. Increasingly, notions of cross-pollination and mutual exchange hold sway in the constant conversation chambers of Australian art.

Prominent collectors, such as Colin and Liz Laverty, seek to situate indigenous art in the domain of contemporary art-making; the new, bimonthly Australian Aboriginal Art magazine is running an occasional series on collaborative projects; old-school

bush-raised painters are dying, and younger community-based painters, conscious renovators and modifiers of tradition, are coming to the fore.

With the frontier now so unstable between traditional and modern, indigenous and non-indigenous, a time of contestation and renewed creative encounter beckons.

Is the time one of cultural theft, or harmonious rapprochement between worlds? Must the consequences of colonisation inevitably be colonial? There will be ample fuel for cultural studies as these dilemmas play out in the years ahead.

Works by Ildiko Kovacs, Wakartu Cory Surprise and Jukuja Dolly Snell are at Raft Artspace, Darwin, until July 11.

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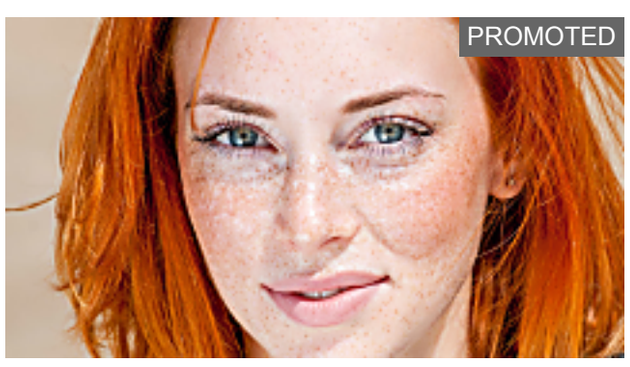

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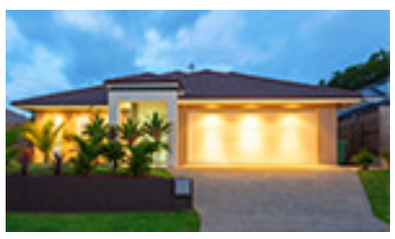

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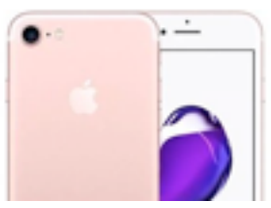

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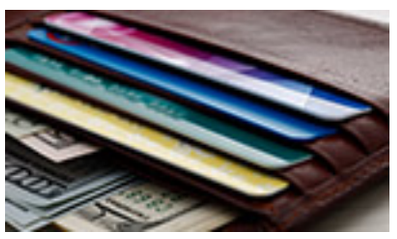

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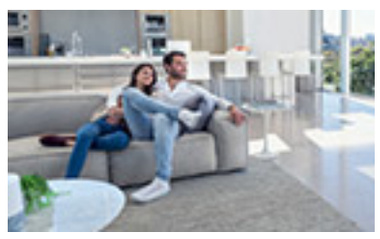

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