

# Seven Stories about You

- Claire G. Coleman



Claire G. Coleman on ethical purchasing, supporting the agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and acknowledging power imbalances.

In 2020, the Indigenous Art Code commissioned Noongar writer and arts advocate Claire G. Coleman to write an essay exploring the nuances of the Indigenous visual art market, looking at the various ways art travels from artist to consumer. The assumption being that Coleman would unpack this from the perspective of the artists who typically operate within the main supply chains in the market for Indigenous visual arts. She however chose to cleverly 'flip the script' and instead craft seven vivid and thought-provoking narratives from the perspective of the consumer, usually a non-Indigenous buyer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Seven Stories about You speaks directly to the consumer, asking you to consider the role you have to play in ensuring artists get a fair go and are able to maintain agency in their arts practice and commercial arrangements. Like much of Coleman's writing, she also asks the viewer to consider the broader context – history, ongoing colonisation and the resulting power imbalances that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

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Art is one of the things that makes us human; for we are, perhaps, the only species able to appreciate art. As natural as it is to want to buy art, it's also natural to be concerned that the artist might be exploited. Many Australians, and visitors, want to buy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, it is beautiful and much can be gained by learning more of the cultures that belong on this continent. The cultures that produces Indigenous art are the oldest living cultures on Earth. Aboriginal art is a great investment, teaches you a lot about Aboriginal culture and buying it can provide artists and their communities with economic independence.

We also want the artist to be paid a fair price.

For years I have travelled for the art; my old troopy dragging my caravan from gallery to art centre to exhibition to art fair.

There are so many ways to discover art, so many ways to purchase it. So much has been written about the ethical risks of buying art, that it is understandable people are confused and afraid when faced with the opportunities Aboriginal art provides us. Aboriginal artists and the Aboriginal art cultural landscape even have a special language, loan words in Aboriginal English with which to understand the ethics and the concerns people have around exploitation. None of us want to support exploitation of Aboriginal artists so we need to know how to avoid it.

Everybody can get confused but I have been around more than most, seen, heard and learnt a lot.

Here are your stories.

## Story I

The sky over Alice Springs is the relentless blue visitors expect to experience, a sky that could see right through you if it was watching. She's there again, sitting cross-legged on the grass in the mall; bright acrylic paintings of Country on canvas, spread out before her, glistening in the sunlight. She looks happy to be in the sun, happy to sell her work; carrying out shouted conversations with passers-by and with the other street vendors.

A work strikes you; you want it with a passion, it's in your price range and you are ready to buy.

But you fear that you are exploiting her, that the price she is asking is unfair to her, that she does not feel in a position to set a fair price. And you fear that she will misuse the money in some way. And you fear that you, having money, are the one in power; that you are making her life worse rather than better.

You wonder why she is not selling in a gallery. Why is she not working in an art centre? Why is she not safe on Country among family instead of sitting here on the street hawking her art?

You don't know what to do so you walk on sweltering down the mall.

The next day she is still there, under a tree and so is the piece, again you are filled with desire for it, but this time you stop to talk. She tells you the story of the artwork, tells you of her grandkids and her kids and her home in town. It soon becomes clear she wants to sell her work that way, sell it herself and be beholden to nobody. She is choosing to work alone, to not sell to a gallery, to not work in an art centre.

You suddenly realise sitting there selling art is not substantially different to the artists selling their works on the internet and social media.

She likes being there, selling her art, explaining the story to whoever buys it; she gets all the money for it, and she can undercut the dealers. Why should the dealer get a cut if she can sell the art herself, direct to the customer? You pay her what she asks for and take her beautiful work with you.

## Story II

Your hands were hurting from gripping the wheel for hours, so you needed a break from the relentless driving of the road trip anyway. You turn into the gravel track to the art centre, park in front of the large shed-like building. Through the door, there are artists around the acrylic paint splattered table, a rainbow of plastic pots of paints on a nearby bench. Hanging canvases line the walls, so many it's almost overwhelming, you hone in on an artist you like, on a work that moves you.

You wonder if there is more.

"There's more in the racks", the young white person says, "I can help you look if you like". They are carrying a pot of red paint to an artist who has a half-finished painting and tin pannikin of tea, big enough to drown in, before her. There are racks with beautiful art hanging like pants, the metal hangers make a scraping noise as you and the worker slide them along looking at the art.

"I like this one", you say, "can you tell me more about the artist and the painting".

"She's not here today", the artworker replies, "I will get you her bio and the story".

The bio is a sheet of paper with a photo of the artist and a short biography. She grew up on a cattle station, she's retirement age, but still painting. You ask the worker about the place.



Martu Country ©Gabrielle Sullivan, 2008

"It's an Aboriginal-owned centre", they tell you, "the artists started it and run it, I work for them. They get 60% of the price of the art, the rest of the money goes to buy materials and keep the lights on". You choose a piece you want and pay the price. A young Aboriginal arts worker wraps the work "this piece was by my Aunty" he says with a smile then hands you the work and a certificate of authenticity – to prove provenance, and his Aunty's bio page. You return to your car and the long drive confident that the artists are in control.

### Story III

There's more art than you have ever seen in one place, lining the walls cheek to jowl, rolled up in racks, piled on tables; canvases, works on paper, painted yidakis, carved objects, woven baskets. There is so much you want to buy but you fear that the art in that gallery has been purchased unethically. There have been many terrible stories of artists being ripped off by unscrupulous gallery owners.

An artist walks in holding a rolled-up canvas, unrolls it before the gallery owner, they start negotiating a price, the artist is adamant on getting what the art is worth. He is about to walk out unhappy, but the owner of the gallery stops him, they continue to haggle and settle on a price.

They both seem happy at the end of the exchange, at least they are both smiling. You ask the gallery owner how much the artists gain for their art; they are happy to tell you and you are delighted the artist is being paid enough.

Being confident the owner of the gallery has bought the art at a fair price, you feel there is no issue buying art there. The owner tells you he has a good relationship with the artists who work at home or on Country and bring him art to buy, he assures you he pays a good price for the art and unlike the commission galleries he pays the artists cash right away; sometimes the artist does not want to wait for the art to sell before being paid.

There's a poker worked wood carving of an echidna you want, it's not expensive and you believe that the artist sold it for what they thought was a good price, choosing the convenience of immediate payment over perhaps more money and having to wait until the art sells to earn their share.

### Story IV

The Aboriginal art t-shirt I want is made in China and sold by a non-Indigenous company. This concerns me a lot, you've heard of fake art, and you are worried this t-shirt is fake, that it's not really Aboriginal work, that it's stealing culture, or that it's stolen work, the t-shirt made without permission breaking copyright law and only benefiting the seller not the artist.

How can an Aboriginal t-shirt be made in China, you don't want to buy such a fake thing but you really want the t-shirt. You dig deeper into the company website.

The seller's site informs you that they had the work made overseas to keep the price down but that the artist has licensed the right to reproduce the work to them. The artist is getting paid a percentage of every t-shirt sale. You realise, the money from those licenses is important, it would be enough to keep the wolves from the door.

You look on the site some more and find more t-shirts you like. You decide to buy all of them because you know that although a non-Indigenous manufacturer is benefiting, so are the artists, through their license fees. You learn from looking online that these license fees are a major source of income for Indigenous artists. Your friends need to know about this, you tell them all that buying licensed Indigenous products is not only a good way to access great products but is also good for communities.

One of your friends will love that teapot.



Mparntwe ©Indigenous Art Code 2020

## Story V

You go to a gallery, owned by a whitefella, it sells nothing but Aboriginal art and there is a lot of it. You walk around the gallery for a while and there are a few pieces you would like on your wall. The owner sees you looking at a certain work, the price is eye-watering. "The artist is out the back painting if you would like to see", he says.

The studio is a dark room through a door from the gallery, paint splattered and cold, you feel the dirt in the room will get on your clothes when you walk in there to meet the artists. An artist is sitting on the floor painting, a cup of tea before her. Someone brings her a thin sandwich and a fresh cup of tea. She eats and you wonder if that's all she will eat today. You understand from previous experience that not all Aboriginal artists are exploited but this time you have a bad feeling.

You are worried you might be helping someone to exploit artists so you don't buy anything that time; you can always find out more and come back. But you want that piece, it's perfect, you can't stop thinking about it. Not knowing what else to do you ask around, at the Aboriginal-owned art centres, at the other galleries, at the info centre. Nobody wants to be direct, but what they tell you makes you understand that that gallery pays the artists very little and takes the price of their lunch out of the money they are paid; some artists, you are told, are trying to earn enough money there to go home, but are paid so little they never quite make it.



Naarm ©Indigenous Art Code 2022

You know from the prices in the shop that their mark-up must be huge.

It's exploitation, you think, and you don't want any part of it. You decide not to shop there.

## Story VI

Not long after you walk into the white walled gallery someone hands you a glass of bubbly. The room is filled with people; some of them so well-dressed you feel out of place, others dressed casually but some of those are in clothes worth more than a secondhand car. You've been around and know a few people and you greet each other, then there's art to look at. It's a little more expensive than it is at an art centre even though some of it had been acquired from one, but you know that's because the gallery collects a commission on top of the fair price an artist or art centre would ask, but the gallery also has the best of the works available.

The pieces are beautiful, some of the most stunning you have ever discovered, because the gallery makes an effort to find the best available, using their contacts to reserve the best works before they are available elsewhere. The gallerist is also often a curator, a trained and experienced specialist in the field, who finds the best works and makes them available to the visitors to the gallery in the big city. There are stunning works from art centres and also from independent artists, who have negotiated with the gallery on their own terms.

The artists get a good price but have to wait for the art to be sold, not that this would be a problem for the artists whose work you are seeing. The red dots on the wall tell you, most of the works have been sold before the official opening. You can see an artist, visiting from a remote community to celebrate the opening, she seems excited at the success of the show.

These galleries are a great place when you can't get out of the city, they have great art works and bring them to the urban markets. They are also sometimes the galleries representing Aboriginal artists from the cities and the only places to acquire their work. You know they are ethical because they work with art centres and with artists who have agency in their dealings.

## Story VII

On a dry season holiday in Darwin, you walk into a cluttered souvenir shop, there are knickknacks on the wall, and in racks; cheap Australiana, Australian and Aboriginal flags, tea-towels, toy kangaroos, painted shot glasses, coffee mugs; lots of stuff for tourists. There's a small painted didgeridoo that you like, it's too small to play but it will look great in your living room. The label assures you it's real wood and an authentic Aboriginal design but you are not sure whether to trust it, so you read the fine print which reads "made in Indonesia".

It's cheap, much cheaper than the Didgeridoos you have seen at other shops and smaller so you can fit it in your suitcase much easier, and you want it as a souvenir. It's the price that decides things in the end – less than half the price of the others you have seen and the painting is good enough. What a memory you will have when you take that home. You look forward to telling stories about Australia using your souvenir as a prop.

When you get back to your hotel you check the internet and discover that the company who produces that product has a factory where they pay non-Indigenous people to reproduce Indigenous works. You are ashamed that you have bought a fake product, that it's not Aboriginal at all. Researching more you discover that many of the products in those shops and most of the "Aboriginal" souvenirs available in Australia are fake and you feel better, it's not your fault.

You find a brand that sells only work licensed from Aboriginal artists and decide to buy that next time you want an Aboriginal product.

You don't want anybody you know buying the wrong thing, you decide to tell everybody you know about it; everybody makes mistakes, and you want to make sure nobody else does.

## Some Final Notes –

### Risk and reward

Purchasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art can be intensely rewarding, it can help you feel connected to this country, to the landscape, to the oldest living culture on Earth. Buying art can also seem to be a minefield of potential ethical issues to the uninitiated, it's important to know we have had no part in the exploitation of Aboriginal artists.

It's important to remember that buying art is rewarding enough to be worth the risk and, although exploitation exists, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are not exploited, and many artists make informed decisions that the consumer might not understand.

### Artists' agency

The only real question on the ethics of an art purchase is: "does the artist have control and agency in the decisions?" No matter what the artist chooses, no matter how they decide to sell their work it's the fact they have made an informed decision that matters. Art lovers and the public need to know that respecting the artist's choices is what matters most.

### Persistent exploitation and ongoing colonisation

At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that exploitation of artists occurs. Colonisation has created a power imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and that power imbalance still impacts Indigenous lives and communities. Indigenous people, particularly in remote areas have poorer health, shorter life spans, and



**Image:** Utopia Art Centre.  
**Left:** Jennifer Purvis Kngwarreye, Antwelarr, 2022. ©Jennifer Purvis Kngwarreye/Copyright Agency 2022.  
**Right:** Judy Greeny Kngwarreye, Arlatyey, 2022. ©Judy Greeny Kngwarreye/Copyright Agency

lower incomes than non-Indigenous people. 240 years of colonisation has caused intergenerational inequality and intergenerational trauma has impacted the ability some people have to navigate relationships.

## **Power imbalances**

Power imbalances are a real and ongoing component of colonisation. We need to recognise that power imbalances exist even between the most ethical of galleries and the artists. Ensuring that the dealers don't take advantage of an artist's age, language ability, poverty, intergenerational trauma, poor health or desperation is the challenge the industry faces. In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art market, like in the rest of society, most often problems arise when someone, almost always the person with the greater privilege, uses this power imbalance for personal gain.

It's the dealer's responsibility to be upfront with the artists, to ensure they understand the arrangements and can make informed decisions. As with any relationship between the privileged and the disadvantaged the onus is on the privileged to ensure that arrangements are fair. In other words, in a power imbalance the more powerful individual or group, if ethical, should be the one ensuring that the relationship is not exploitative.

## **Buyer's responsibility**

It's difficult to be certain you are not, in some way, exploiting your privileged position in the colony but it's also important. Rather than relying on others to ensure you are doing the right thing, learn all you can so you can use your privilege to help others rather than continuing the harm that colonisation began.

Do your research into galleries and art centres, check them out on the internet and ask them questions by email or in person. If all else fails, if you cannot find out what you need to know, look for the Indigenous Art Code sticker in their window, it's a strong indicator of intent to support artists ethically.