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Chrischona Schmidt. *'I paint for everyone' – the making of Utopia art*. Dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 2012.

Abstract

The history and development of the Utopia art movement in Central Australia over the past four decades is at the core of this research. This art movement - originally initiated as an adult education program teaching batik-making in the late 1970s - has since become nationally and internationally renowned. Much of its history, however, is unrecorded and photographs of the artworks and their records have not been kept in a database maintained by a community art centre or similar institution. Despite this lack of consistent, publically accessible documentation much has been written from fragmented and partial sources about some artworks and certain artists from Utopia, in particular those who appear to comply with Eurocentric paradigms.

Critics engaging with art from Utopia have situated and praised it by applying concepts from the lexicon of western art history, using parallels with 'abstraction' 'abstract expressionism' 'impressionism', noting visual similarities to European masters of the 20th century'. I question the assumption underlying some of these critiques that these visual similarities are solely a product of the artists' responses to market demands as articulated by intermediaries, irrespective of their own vision or agency. Through close observation of artistic practices and negotiation processes between artists and art dealers, I demonstrate that artists' agency can be uncovered. Throughout the history of the art movement artists have had to become their own agents in dealing with art dealers, wholesalers, curators and collectors. I argue that being one's own agent in the art world might have a far greater influence on the art than has been discussed to date.

In this thesis I describe and define the different currents and sub-currents found in Utopia art, which reflect this agency, by focusing on genres, themes and styles. A close formal analysis of representative artworks, drawn from my documentation of an extensive corpus of works, combined with the methods of art history – such as qualitative interviews and observation of art practice and negotiation processes – reveals the influences and effects on the production of these artworks and their final form.

I argue that the impact of art dealers, the art world, families, other artists in the community, and the constraints associated with everyday life in a remote community all affect the creation of artworks. I see them all as 'influences' on the art practice and production. My analysis of

works by more than 150 artists, through this framework, reveals similarities and differences in subject, theme and style, in particular the distinction which can be seen in works produced by artists from Alyawarr and Anmatyerr language groups. This examination of artworks and relationships in the art world facilitates a better understanding of the emerging of local art movements, their development and their multi-layered histories. Furthermore it provides a point of comparison for further studies and research into Indigenous art histories throughout Australia.