

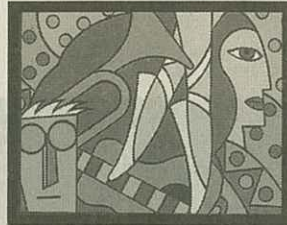
# Indigenous art for Venice a self-defining choice

I HAVE an enduring childhood memory of visiting the Australian Museum, which in my recollections was dominated by wooden-framed glass cabinets showing stuffed animals and skeletons. The skeletons were unnerving, but I remember being reassured (I'm not sure by whom) that they weren't from people like us, they were Aborigines.

Des Griffin, the museum's director, tells of photographs from the 1920s showing Aboriginal skulls in cases. Memories often corrupt history, but this one is true. Times have changed. The visitor to the Australian Museum now sees Indigenous Australians: Australia's First People — an engrossing exhibition that reveals the complex layers of Aboriginal histories and Aboriginal cultures.

Aboriginal people were involved in setting up the exhibition and continue their involvement in the public programs that are now a signature of the Australian Museum's projects. So why raise my memory of distant evil? What does it matter that museums once collected human remains for "study"? It matters because many people remember, while others try to deny this recent past ever happened.

Aboriginal people, whose culture is still based on an oral tradition, know that the

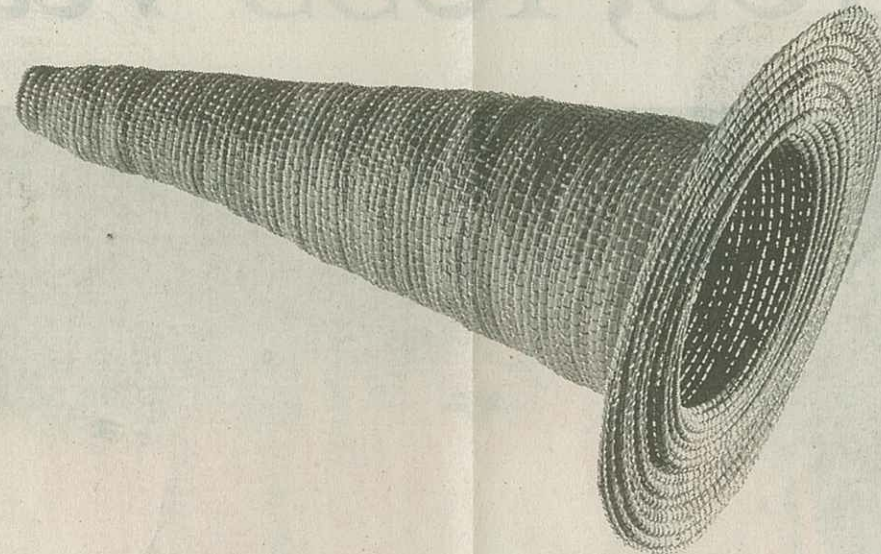


SATURDAY VIEW

Joanna Mendelssohn

European settlers brought a world where the original inhabitants were seen first as subjects and later as objects. In the long investigation into Aboriginal traditions by European settlers, first anthropologists and later curators collected, recorded and photographed the work of their hands and the products of the continuing culture. Until very recently all decision-makers on the quality and importance of Aboriginal art were Europeans.

Last week's official launch of *Fluent* — the Australian contribution to the 1997 Venice Biennale — is the latest demonstration that the cultural establishment



Biennale bound: *Eel Trap* (1997) by Yvonne Koolmatie

is recognising the need for Aboriginal people to speak for their own culture. It is not possible anymore to mount a significant Aboriginal cultural event without Aboriginal involvement and, increasingly, Aboriginal control.

In some institutions this thinking has

become confused, as there are many Aboriginal cultures, just as there were once many different Aboriginal languages. It takes a rare and talented curatorial team to communicate with a broad range of communities. In this case the selection of the artists and the

experience of the curators make this project a winner.

The artists — Kwementyai Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatie and Judy Watson — reflect three generations of Aboriginal art, with interwoven concerns on the nature of the land and their connections to it. The two curators, Brenda Croft and Hetti Perkins, are likewise Aborigines. The only non-Aborigine in this team is the manager, Victoria Lynn.

*Fluent* is a refinement on a survey exhibition of Aboriginal women's art that these three organised in 1991 and so it continues its affirmation of the continuing influence of Aboriginal matriarchs in a society that is often defined as a patriarchy. The strength of Aboriginal female culture is more than new wave feminism. Because so many Aboriginal children were stolen from their families, only the women had a chance to keep their culture.

The Venice team reinforces the message that the arts are one of the few fields where it is an advantage to be an Aborigine. Bright arts administrators of Aboriginal descent find doors opening, where a generation ago they were firmly shut. Non-Aboriginal curators who have survived in this new climate are those who both consult with Aboriginal people and nurture emerging Aboriginal talent.

The exclusion of non-Aboriginal specialists from Australian indigenous arts appears at first to be absurd. French nationality is not a prerequisite for the study of 18th-century Paris and, while a knowledge of Mandarin is essential to researching Chinese art, no one insists that only ethnic Chinese should write on the Sung dynasty or post-Mao painting.

But the memories of the skeletons in the museums are so fresh and the wounds of the stolen children are still not healed. For many Aboriginal people, learning about their culture, and sometimes participating in it, is all a part of the process of making sense of their lives. There is a recognition that unless Aboriginal people feel confident that they own their identity, then all talk of reconciliation is empty.

The complaints that Aborigines are wrong in keeping their art to themselves reminds me of one of the stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition — the parable of the rich man who owned many sheep and the poor man who loved his one ewe lamb. The rich man needed to kill a sheep, so he took the poor man's ewe lamb rather than use one of his own. Until the wounds are healed, and until the land takers learn to share, it is important to leave indigenous Australians their cultural one ewe lamb.