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Sotheby's makes sure Aboriginal artists are not deserted



Corporate social responsibility in the world of art - Tim Klingender and Tim Jeffries.

Photo: *Edwina Pickles*

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ABORIGINAL art is big business and growing. At auctioneer Sotheby's Australia, sales figures for indigenous art and artefacts have leapt from \$100,000 in 1990 to about \$7 million last year.

Sotheby's director of Aboriginal art, Tim Klingender, is the first to admit, though, that while galleries worldwide are raking in profits from the work of Australia's indigenous artists, the artists and their communities rarely benefit. This is why, when the Pintupi communities of the Western Desert were looking to raise money for a dialysis centre that would allow kidney disease sufferers to be treated in their own environment, Sotheby's agreed to help by holding an auction.

Having spent some time in Alice Springs looking for art, Mr Klingender had first-hand experience of the health problems facing the community.

"I was constantly hearing from the Papunya Tula artists about people in the deserts who had fought to get their land back, were now having to leave their home and their country and their children and their ceremonies and everything and be relocated to Alice Springs and spend the rest of their lives on dialysis," he says.

"They were either doing that or they were out in the country and dying."

Some of the patients were themselves artists. But the community, led by Pintupi elder, Mr Zimran, had been rejected for government funding. Instead, they raised \$1.1 million through the Sotheby's auction in 2000. The money was used to set up two dialysis units in 2004.

Now, with the help of Papunya Tula artists who donated many of their pieces, Sotheby's has completed another fund-raising, this time contributing \$278,000 towards the project.

Aid also came from British millionaire Tim Jeffries' gallery Hamilton's in London, where a touring exhibition promoting the works of the Western Desert was held last year.

Sarah Brown, who manages the indigenous company formed to provide remote dialysis services, the Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation, says 30 patients are now using the dialysis service.

"Certainly, a number of patients from the Western Desert are painters," she says.

"One of the painters who had a painting in the London exhibition is on dialysis and being cared for by us. It is a good way for Sotheby's to give back to the community."

Mr Klingender sees it as his company's responsibility to help the Pintupi communities.

"In terms of a corporate thing, I think it's important for companies to give back to the communities in which they are involved," he says. "

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