

Durack: let's look at the big picture

The Durack scandal has implications for how we judge the intrinsic worth of a piece of art, writes

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Elizabeth Durack . . . painted pictures on Aboriginal themes long before the Aboriginal art boom began in the 1970s.

ELIZABETH Durack has said she never intended to create another "Demidenko" scandal when she adopted the fictional alter ego of an Aboriginal artist, Eddie Burrup. Now, with Aboriginal groups looking for ways to sue the elderly artist for fraud, the question of what she did and did not intend becomes critical.

Durack cannot deny that she set out to deceive when she entered paintings by Eddie Burrup in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in Darwin, and the *Native Title Now* show at the Tandanya Aboriginal arts centre in Adelaide, but it is hard to say there was anything malicious or even mischievous in her actions. The artist has a long history of friendship, sympathy and understanding with Aboriginal people, and it is here one must look before venturing any pious condemnation.

At the age of 81, Elizabeth Durack belongs to an entirely different era to those street-wise younger artists such as Tim Johnson who has used elements of Aboriginal painting in his own work after first obtaining permission. Neither is there any affinity with Imants Tillers, who has appropriated images by artists such as Michael Nelson Jagamara into his canvas-board anthologies of local and international art.

Durack's relationship with the tribes of north-western Australia goes back to a childhood spent on her parents' grazing properties in the Ord River region. During her lifetime she watched Aborigines go from being outcasts in their own land to fully fledged citizens with the same legal rights as whites. She was painting pictures on Aboriginal themes long before the Aboriginal art boom got under way in the 1970s, when issues such as Mabo and native title were beyond all imagining.

She may be compared to an artist such as Margaret Preston (1875-1963), who originally claimed that Aboriginal motifs made splendid decorations for tea towels and home handicrafts - all in a spirit of tribute to native artists. Yet as she grew more familiar with Aboriginal culture, through her acquaintance with the anthropologist Frederick McCarthy, Preston modified this crass position,

becoming aware of the deeper spiritual significance of Aboriginal signs and symbols.

Durack has possessed this more mature understanding of Aboriginal culture since her earliest years, but has stayed within the bounds of a relatively conservative style. Her paintings have used Aboriginal people as subjects within an old-fashioned Western tradition that often veers close to simple illustration. The Eddie Burrup pictures represent an extraordinary creative leap for an artist in the twilight of her career. They sum up a lifetime's experience of Aboriginal people and have been made with such consummate skill that they fooled experts in the field. If the invention of Eddie Burrup was psychologically necessary for the creation of these paintings, instead of attacking Durack's morals, perhaps we should admire her artistic ingenuity.

The paintings may well spring from the artist's "personal neuroses and longings", as curator Doreen Mellor puts it, but recognising that the work originates in some deep inner need should make us more tolerant of her deceptions. Having created Eddie Burrup; having painted the pictures, authored a life story, and written convincing "transcripts" of his speech, how could Durack resist trying out the strength of her fiction in the public? Not many artists would have advanced so far and held back.

The fact that she chose to reveal the truth voluntarily

shows there was no evil design at work - only the creative excitement of making Eddie Burrup seem more and more real, until an uneasy conscience called a halt. It is important to remember that the story was not broken by an investigative journalist, but revealed in a sensitive fashion by a friend, art historian Robert Smith, in the pages of *Art Monthly*. Smith says Durack authorised him to reveal the truth "because she feared the situation was getting out of hand".

The great virtue of all literary or artistic hoaxes, from Ern Malley to Helen Demidenko to Eddie Burrup, is that they shatter our cultural complacency, forcing us to examine attitudes we take for granted. Ern Malley seemed a greater poet when he was an unknown prodigy; *The Hand That Signed the Paper* seemed a more powerful book because it had been written by a Ukrainian, and Eddie Burrup's paintings were more impressive when the artist was thought to be Aboriginal. In the first heated exchanges, the experts are embarrassed, the hoaxer is damned, and the works lose all merit overnight - but "authenticity" is not everything. Eventually, one may take a more dispassionate view and learn to judge a work by its intrinsic qualities. Unlike the Demidenko affair, there is no suggestion of plagiarism in the Eddie Burrup paintings. They may yet be accepted as some of Elizabeth Durack's most important and original works.