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THE FANTASIST: ELIZABETH DURACK AND EDDIE BURRUP

Why would a well-established artist create a fantasy that she was an Aboriginal man from the Pilbara and submit “his” paintings to a major Indigenous art prize, and a leading commercial gallery, and then insist on publicising the deception, only to recoil at the predictable response? This is the fascinating conundrum that prompted Louise Morrison’s article “The Art of Eddie Burrup.”

Let’s clear the air first of all. Was it fraud? Yes it was clearly fraudulent for a non-Indigenous woman to create a false identity for a fictional artist and to present the artworks he was purported to have painted to an Indigenous only exhibition. As Morrison confirms in her article this act of deception was compounded when the artist’s daughter, in the hope of securing a commercial exhibition, submitted other paintings to Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.

But that doesn’t answer the intriguing question of why the artist acted fraudulently. Was it a desire to rekindle the waning critical interest in her work or the hope of making money from this deception? Was it envy that prompted her to act, anger at the success of Indigenous artists no matter what the quality of their work and as such a mischievous attempt to undermine the Aboriginal art market or did she indeed believe she had an authentic Aboriginal story to tell? Or perhaps it was a potent mix of some or all or even other motives?

It’s not inconceivable that Durack was seeking recognition of her talent at a time when she felt overlooked by critics, curators and collectors. In an interview recorded by Film Australia for the Australian Biography series, she reports that according to her daughter and dealer, her new “morphological works” were unlikely to find a market under her own name but, “if these were done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere, but you’d never agree to doing that, you’ve always played things so dumb

and so straight, you'd never sign things under another name."¹ Her rather quick take up of the idea suggests both her excitement about showing the paintings and her eagerness to have them recognised as works of significance. The monetary gain may also have been a motivation but her comments later in the interview that the creation of Eddie Burrup was "a device to liberate me, and it did liberate me" draws the focus back onto her work and her desire to re-energise her creative practice.

This sense of liberation is one of the central motivations for artists adopting anonymity or pseudonymity. As Morrison points out, the contemporary Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett has created the pseudonym John Citizen, a non-indigenous person, "... as a device to further his investigation of identity."² Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates the American author sought the freedom to explore a new genre, mystery fiction, when she created Rosamond Smith. "It was a new birth. I was renewing myself. Everything was being given me one more time," Oates explains.³ It seems clear that Durack also felt she was given "one more time" and a chance to make work that broke through boundaries and opened up new possibilities.

It's also possible that the decision to accede to her daughter's suggestion may have been motivated by the phenomenal success of so many Aboriginal artists who had taken up art late in life and quickly achieved a level of critical acclaim that surpassed Durack's own, despite many years of hard work. Indeed the comment that if her new paintings been "done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere" seems to confirm this view of the art market as favouring Indigenous artists and whether or not it was malicious it was clearly an attempt to deceive. That said it does seem clear that this is not a case of plagiarism. The new paintings were strongly influenced by Durack's knowledge of the rock art of the Burrup Peninsula, as she admits in the notes written to explain Eddie Burrup's inspiration, but she was not appropriating the work of another artist, she was Eddie Burrup.

This is the central core of the whole controversy and it's why Djon Mundine, Wayne Bergmann, Doreen Mellor, Kaye Mundine and many other Indigenous Australians have been so outraged and affronted by what Bergmann describes as "the ultimate act of colonization."⁴ Did Durack really believe she was channelling an Aboriginal person and speaking with an authentic voice? She may have been delusional but even if she believed this conceit why did she choose a male persona?

It is generally accepted that Durack knew Aboriginal society well enough to understand the clear demarcation of men and women's business,

so was this an attempt to create work from an entirely new perspective or was it anger at the success of more famous male artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous? If the latter then it is more easily explained, if on the other hand she was hoping to liberate herself and her creative practice, as she suggests, then it raises other issues.

Artists throughout history have adopted pseudonyms of the opposite sex to tease or taunt their viewers or readers and to gain new insights from taking on a different persona, but with Durack's knowledge of Aboriginal society it seems incredible she didn't realize the added insult to Indigenous people attached to her adoption of a male persona. Although, as Morrison points out she had previously created works under her own name that contained secret/sacred men's business,⁵ so it is possible she was less empathetic than was supposed throughout her life.

Morrison argues that the complex histories involved in the Eddie Burrup fiasco provide us with "rare and rich reflections of our culture" but the real fascination it offers is the psychological case study of a fantasist whose fiction undermines her credibility as an empathetic advocate of Aboriginal culture and reveals the emotional and intellectual turmoil of an artist's musings at the end of a long career. This is fertile ground indeed for further research, discussion and conjecture.

NOTES

1 Elizabeth Durack, *Australian Biographies Series*, Film Australia, 1997

2 Louise Morrison, "The Art of Eddie Burrup", *Westerly* 54, 2009, 81.

3 Joyce Carol Oates, "Success and the Pseudonymous Writer: Turning Over A New Self," *New York Times Book Review*, December 6, 1987.

4 Wayne Bergmann quoted in Morrison.

5 See the discussion of the *Cord of Alcheringa* series detailed by Morrison.