

Aboriginal male artist unveiled as white woman

FROM ROGER MAYNARD IN SYDNEY

THE Australian art world swooned when they saw the work of "Aboriginal" painter Eddie Burrup, whose haunting canvases depicted Aboriginal "Dreamtime" legends.

The only trouble is, Eddie Burrup does not exist. He is a figment of the imagination of an 82-year-old white woman whose hoax has embarrassed the cognoscenti and infuriated the nation's indigenous artists. Not since Brisbane literary award winner, Helen Demidenko, admitted she fooled the publishing world in 1995 by assuming a false identity, have Australia's artistic elite been so humbled.

The elderly painter who so successfully pulled the wool over everyone's eyes, is in fact Elizabeth Durack, a pastoralist, author and amateur anthropologist who lives in the

remote Kimberley region of Western Australia. Under Burrup's fictitious name, she produced a range of critically acclaimed work, including paintings, photographs and even an autobiography. Everyone assumed Burrup was a recluse living a hermit's existence in the Outback.

"His" creations were so impressive that they even featured in a touring Aboriginal art show. This month some of the works were due to be entered for the highly respected Sulman Prize, to be announced on March 21. But after yesterday's revelation "Burrup's" work will almost certainly be withdrawn.

Durack, of Irish descent, is a member of one of the country's most famous pioneering families. She is a well-known painter in her own right and



Elizabeth Durack, a painter in her own right, has confessed to her deception, infuriating Australia's indigenous artists

confessed to her deception in an arts magazine, but refused to explain her motivation. "It's my last creative phase," was all she would say.

However, art historian Robert Smith, a close family friend, defended her actions. "She has created a character, just as a playwright or a poet

or a novelist will create a character," he said. "She hasn't appropriated any motifs or themes, or forms of Aboriginal art at all," he insisted.

Members of the Aboriginal art community were less forgiving, claiming she had stolen indigenous culture. "It's

the last thing left that you could possibly take away other than our lives or shoot us all," John Mundine, an Aboriginal art curator, said. Doreen Mellor, senior curator at Flinders Art Museum in Adelaide, said: "As an Aboriginal person I feel really offended."

Ironically, the Durack fam-

ily probably has a deeper knowledge of Aboriginal affairs than many other white settlers, having lived among Australia's indigenous people in Kimberley for nearly 180 years. In the last century the Duracks had a reputation as the only family of pastoralists who did not shoot Aborigines.