

# DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

PHIL BROWN

IN THE world of indigenous art is the dealer really the devil? With a sense of mischief author Adrian Newstead suggests as much in his comprehensive book on the subject, *The Dealer is The Devil: An Insider's History of the Aboriginal Art Trade*. It's a provocative title designed to get our attention and it does, although Newstead confesses the title wasn't his idea.

"My wife suggested *The Dealer is The Devil*," he says. "It fits perfectly into the zeitgeist of the period."

Much has been written about Aboriginal art but Newstead's book is unique because of the breadth of his knowledge and first-hand experience. This book is a history, a memoir, a thorough examination of the trade. It is the story of his life on the road and a chronicle of some extraordinary friendships with the people who matter most in this book, the artists. Newstead is a lucky man who has been at the coalface of one of the great art flowerings of the late 20th and early 21st century.

If you think that's a purely parochial assessment, think again. This is a global art movement of great importance.

Tapping into the collective unconscious and creativity of the oldest culture on the planet has given us a variety of art and artists that has no



comparison. There have been many negative stories along the way, some of them about carpetbagging dealers and the vagaries of the art market.

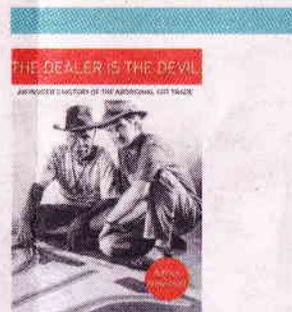
Newstead knows about all this from the inside, being an art dealer himself, founder of Cooe Aboriginal Art Gallery in Sydney, Australia's oldest continuously operating Aboriginal art gallery. It opened in 1981.

So are whitefellas such as Newstead art mercenaries cashing in on poor artists?

There have been ruthless art dealers along the way but, for the most part, whitefellas, such as Newstead, have been people of goodwill, excited and enthusiastic about indigenous art with a desire to share the good news. Newstead's experience is unique because

he knows everyone involved in this business, all the artists, dealers, auctioneers and writers. His energy and sense of adventure has fuelled a remarkable career.

"My life in Aboriginal art has been a roller-coaster ride, traversing the continent and grappling with complex issues as they unfold," Newstead says. One of those complex issues is the idea of ownership and that doesn't just extend to land rights. Who owns indigenous art, which is intrinsically linked to the cultural and spiritual life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? This question has been explored by several artists, including Queensland's Richard Bell, an indigenous provocateur who makes a few appearances in Newstead's



## THE DEALER IS THE DEVIL

Adrian Newstead  
Brandl & Schlesinger, \$50

book. "Playing to an essentially disaffected black audience, Richard cleverly promoted the notion that only black people should interpret,

promote and even sell Aboriginal art," Newstead writes.

"His word play and temper resonated strongly with many contemporary observers, but to my mind it was yet another cheap shot."

In other words, Newstead believes that, although dealers are not angels, they are not devils either.

His book is a journey into the heart of the continent and all the big names in indigenous art are here.

The story of indigenous art wouldn't be complete, however, without looking at the business because it is that business that has helped it go global. It's a fascinating story, Newstead has been part of it and, in the end, the devil is in the detail.

**ATTENTION GRABBING:** Queenie McKenzie's work *Three Sisters, Blue Mountains* features in the book *The Dealer is the Devil*.

## E-BOOKS

SIMON GROTH

IN 1950, Alan Turing devised a method for testing the quality of a machine's intelligence. Australian writers and technologists Oscar Schwartz and Benjamin Laird have created a website called Bot or Not that simulates the Turing test using poetry. The site presents you with a poem and your job is to determine whether it was written by a computer (bot) or a human (not). It's a simple task that proves fiendishly tricky.  
<http://bit.ly/ifbook467>

I'M ALWAYS on the lookout for ways to better plough through large quantities of text. Spritz is an electronic reader that presents one word at a time in a small space with key letters highlighted. You can slowly build the speed of the text up to 600 words a minute.  
<http://bit.ly/ifbook468>

IN CLEANING *Mona Lisa*, art historian Lee Standstead uses Apple's iBooks platform to produce an immersive tour through renaissance and realist art. The book uses image galleries and video interviews to get beneath the veneer of the Old Masters.  
<http://bit.ly/ifbook469>



SIMON GROTH IS WRITER, EDITOR AND MANAGER OF IF:BOOK AUSTRALIA