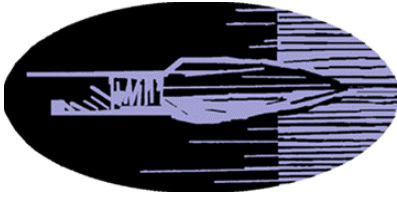


Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative Ltd



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It almost feels like a dream. It only becomes a reality when you have to haul your body out of bed to crank up for a lot more invisible hours to save a chunk of Aboriginal history.

The archaeological find is the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, and it was discovered almost 25 years ago. A quarter of a century may not seem like a lot of time for most folks, but in the Aboriginal timeline of resistance, struggle, oppression and colonisation, it is enormous.

Even now in 2011, people in universities learn about Boomalli as if it was a relic of a bygone era. They do not understand that people have been carefully excavating around its perilous position for the last two years, removing layers of depleted soil, not to create a museum object for research and display, but to create a living, thriving organic movement that largely embraces the rights of NSW Aboriginal people. This movement encapsulates the notion that Aboriginal language group artists have the right to a creative space, not only to display their work, but to engage with each other and invite a wider audience of community members to view their art and appreciate their efforts, and to assist by being involved in the artist's creative development.

Boomalli has been through some cathartic episodes, moving locations constantly. Our first home at 18 Meagher Street, Chippendale in Sydney was made possible through the insight and forward thinking of Michael Riley and Gary Foley, who as Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board at the time, promoted our endeavours and initiated Aboriginal Arts Board funding. The year was 1987.

Since then, we have moved to Abercrombie Street, Chippendale and then to Parramatta Road, and our last and final move has been to 55-59 Flood Street, Leichhardt in Sydney.

Never really having a permanent home has been far from an ideal situation. You cannot plan any permanent aspects of your business, you cannot plan cultural maintenance projects, and lastly, you cannot feel secure about your future.

The dichotomy shown when non-Aboriginal organisations, such as the Australian Ballet and the Australian Opera achieve permanent home status, is breathtaking for grassroots Aboriginal organisations.

Navigating the enormous width of the government river system, climbing the almost insurmountable cliffs of bureaucracy, and then finally being expected to find a thriving and bounteous new existence in the desert of non-funding is almost incomprehensible, however senior government officials consider it achievable.

This is just not good enough and greater support should be offered with less judgemental dialogue.

All organisations lose their way, but the essence of success should be the resurrection of sound ideals and good management. We are doing this. The case around Boomalli's existence has been an incredible journey. The last two years have seen an incredible tide of Machiavellian, as well as magnificent people come through our doors. A systematic strategy has been put in motion. From complete devastation and enormous debt, the Co-operative has engaged in a series of clever and coincidental manoeuvres.

One highlight was ambushing Peter Garrett, the then Arts Minister for the Federal Government after a rally at Hyde Park to save the Co-operative. Handing over a petition highlighting the history and benefits of having the Co-operative was taken by Mr Garrett's personal assistant. For a singer turned bureaucrat, with a loud voice, the silence from his office in terms of assistance and support was deafening.

The same Government Department delivered a senior project manager to our gallery, who summarised our enormous volunteer efforts as 'window dressing' and espoused the view that the department owned the building and we should vacate because we, as a cultural institution, were not suitable candidates to possess this building as there were better candidates.

Boomalli had negotiated with the Taxation Office to remit a longstanding tax debt. We had cleaned, inventoried, and gathered a large group of volunteers to assist us in battle. We were galvanised in our response to what that Government Department was intending to do and we were determined to keep our attention on the long term goal, which was, to stay in the space, to work to create an enduring legacy that honoured our ancestors, and to create a strong presence in and for our communities.

A flurry of emails – thousands in fact – was transmitted in the new format of electronic contact. A direct result was contact made with Robyn Ayres, the director of the Arts Law Centre of Australia in Sydney to assist us in finding a pro bono legal firm that would help with some constitutional matters. We were lucky enough that Allens Arthur Robinson offered pro bono services to assist us with our initial inquiry. AAR eventually inherited the onerous task of claiming the legal rights to possess the building and clean up all of our outstanding liabilities. They have done a superb job and we now have the title deeds to the building in our safekeeping.

In acknowledging the hard work, honesty, dedication and pure tenacity of all our volunteers, we acknowledge that we are putting back in to create an environment for Aboriginal artists to feel safe, to evolve as cultural ambassadors and artists in their own right, and to have the confidence to know that people believe in them.

Belief is what we have established in the last two years; belief in the ability to save our history and resist the outside determination to slate it to the archives of history. By hitting the workload at ridiculous levels, by creating a volunteer base of caring individuals who are unselfish and committed, and by wanting to highlight the courage of our ancestors, we have survived - like they had to - keeping the past in the now and creating a vision for the future.

When we realised that we were able to raise funds to secure this future, a plan was hatched to have an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal exhibition, *Black or White – It just ain't right*. The show was developed on the premise that all work would be donated and would send a message that would illustrate that we had broad community support as well as flag that we were on our way back. This exhibition, curated by Bronwyn Bancroft, saw the gallery space transformed with over 60 pieces of donated work, the sales from which, allowed a financial transfusion that was much needed. We have curated and organised 9 unfunded exhibitions since then.

The journey is not over by a long shot, but we almost have all the areas realised in the gallery. We have developed and created two new galleries in front of the building, one small works gallery and an objects and print gallery. We have kept the gallery open with volunteers. We have filed, we have cleaned, and we have all enjoyed the thrill of seeing our Aboriginal brothers' and sisters' beautiful faces when they are at their own exhibition opening as well as those of their friends and community members.

Since its inception, Boomalli has not wanted to be a government-based organisation in competition with the State Gallery. Its charter as the longest run Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in NSW is to focus on NSW Aboriginal language artists, deliver their works to a wider audience, build appreciation around the social, historical and political events that impact on the creation of these works and to support our artists to create. There is nothing in the world that can be more satisfying than to see change in front of your eyes.

Boomalli has changed. It has had some cataclysmic moments that almost saw it disappear into the ether. The avoiding of disaster has been too close for comfort, but now we have systems in place, routines, and we run our gallery on the principles of best practice in all areas – financial reporting, governance, and care for artists and their work. We have almost completed the schedule for the 2012 exhibition program and we are working with the art schools to obtain more volunteers.

At this stage, we have not received any funding from Federal or State Governments, but our local Council, Leichhardt, has been a great support to us. We have a partnership to maintain an Aboriginal presence in Leichhardt. The City of Sydney also supported us with the commissioning of eight artists, which gave us a financial lifeline, as well as gave Boomalli artists an opportunity to be seen by a larger audience in its 2011 'Art and About' project.

We remember those who went to war, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and hold those memories close to us. Let us not forget the struggle of NSW Aboriginal people in their own lands – first the fight for survival against the voracious appetite of new lords of the so-called 'empty lands' and their vicious henchmen, then the continuing struggle to eke out an existence on patches of land deemed not suitable for non-Aboriginal but fine for the original peoples. Coupled with the brutal banning of the use of languages and cultural activities and conscription to domestic servitude, you might consider that supporting a NSW Aboriginal Artists Co-operative could be a great idea and luckily our supporters do.

To finalise this summary, it is essential to highlight the following:

*The land we stand on was first colonised and
we, as Aboriginal people from NSW,
are the last to be recognised*

Bronwyn Bancroft
August 2011