THE CONVERSATION

Rise of Indigenous art speaks volumes about class in Australia
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The children of the wealthy know that mainstream culture belongs to them. urbanartcore.eu

The Conversation is running a series, Class in Australia, to identify, illuminate and debate its many manifestations. Here, Joanna Mendelssohn examines the links between Indigenous art and class.

The great story of recent Australian art has been the resurgence of Indigenous culture and its recognition as a major art form. But in a country increasingly divided by class and wealth, the rise of Indigenous art has had consequences undreamed of by those who first projected it onto the international exhibiting stage.

The 1970s export exhibitions of Arnhem Land bark paintings and reconceptualisations of Western Desert ceremonial paintings had their origins in different regions of the oldest culture. In the following decade, urban Indigenous artists began to make their presence felt. Trevor Nickolls, Lin Onus, Gordon Bennett, Fiona Foley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Tracey Moffatt – all used the visual tools of contemporary western art to make work that was intelligent, confronting, and exhibited around the world.

The continuing success of both traditional and western influenced art forms has led to one of the great paradoxes in Australian culture. At a time when art schools have subjugated themselves to the metrics-driven culture of the modern university system, when creative courses are more and more dominated by the children of privilege, some of the most interesting students and graduates are Indigenous.

The Lin Onus work Girl Shattered is displayed at the Off the Walls aboriginal exhibition at the National Museum in Canberra, in 2011. Alan Porritt/AAP IMage

This has been a long term trend. Trevor Nickolls' generation studied when art schools were part of technical education, at a time when Australia valued education for its own sake. After the old art schools were incorporated into the university system, they suffered the debilitating combination of a lack of resources, an increase of student numbers and a culture that insists that everything must be measured and encouraged art schools to admit students on the basis of an ATAR score instead of their passions.

Because Indigenous students were seen as a special case they managed to avoid the metrification of merit. While the door was shut to other disadvantaged students Indigenous students have been able to use special entry programs. Last year UNSW's College of Fine Arts had 41 Indigenous students enrolled. 75% came through the special admissions pathway. These current high achievers are the recipients of what the Indigenous curator and scholar Brenda L. Croft calls "Albert's Gift", because the artist Albert Namatjira showed his people how to use art to speak for them.

This gift has flowed through generations. Tony Albert, whose work is in the forthcoming Adelaide Biennial, tells how as a schoolboy he saw a painting by Gordon Bennett, which led him to also be an artist. Queensland College of Art at Griffith University has been a national leader here, with Jennifer Herd Marshall Bell and Michael Eather working to create the Bachelor of Visual Arts in Contemporary Indigenous Art.

The graduates of this program include Vernon Ah Kee and it also led to the ProppaNOW collective.

FORT GANSEVOORT

'Grog Gott'im' by Gordon Hookey. AAP Image/Nellie Castan Gallery, Gordon Hooke

Not all Indigenous art students become artists. Some use the project-management skills inherent in making any creative endeavour to move onwards and upwards elsewhere. The life of an artist is risky, and financially insecure.

But because there are so many successful Indigenous artists, art remains both readily understood as a pathway out of poverty and a way to [argue the cause]

This remains one major difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as they look towards the arts. Indigenous art in all its incarnations is celebrated as a pinnacle of Australian culture. The energy and creativity of this generation of Indigenous artists gives a brilliant message of self-affirmation.

The children of the wealthy, who now dominate undergraduate arts education, know that mainstream culture belongs to them. There is no message of self-belief presented to those working-class students who may wish to take their art further because it was the one school subject that made sense to them.

SebastianDooris

It is hard being the first member of a family to finish school, to aspire to break the class barrier, to study at university, to have a career instead of just a job. It is even harder without family support.

A generation ago, the logical pathway to the middle classes was to take a bonded teaching scholarship and be paid apprentice wages for being a student.

That ended when the last of the baby boomers finished school and there was a temporary glut of teachers. Even in the 1980s it was possible to study free of charge, and work part-time at a bar or café for cash in hand to supplement Austudy.

In the distant past, when tertiary study was less formalised, less measured than today, visually-talented working-class kids often gravitated to art schools. Art education became one way to soften the barriers of class. The talented poor, the mavericks and the maddies mingled with the daughters and sons of the establishment who treated art school as a sophisticated finishing

school as well as a place to talent scout for the next big thing.

Loss of freedom

In Australia the sense of freedom to choose a career seems to have been lost at about the same time as the introduction of HECS in 1989, two years after the stockmarket crash of 1987 which was the trigger for the "the recession we had to have". The Howard government increased the rate of HECS and in 1998 tightened the rules for Austudy so that students were deemed to be dependent on their parents until they turned 25, instead of 21.

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There is a disconnect between the class of people who make and administer the rules and the lived experience of the many. Those who run the world see debt as a tool, a means to a well-considered end, a way to access working capital, a pathway to future wealth.

The poor see things differently. My father's parents lost their home in the Great Depression. At the same time, in suburban Sydney, my mother went to school with bare feet. Those scars ran so deep that my parents were not prepared to be guarantors for me to take a teaching scholarship. I was lucky that in the 1960s, the Commonwealth government provided free education plus a means-tested allowance for high achievers.

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Accelerating divisions of class and wealth have seen a dramatic reduction in the number of bright, edgy students from the unfashionable suburbs studying the arts. The cultural shift that sees tertiary study in the same light as an advanced trade certificate, means that those who have no family experience of the value of the arts, see them as valueless. Hence the popularity of apparently utilitarian degrees such as business studies. The rich know how the arts stimulate intellectual development, and so continue to encourage creativity in their children.

The growth of a culture of privilege is not limited to Australia, nor to the visual arts. The British journalist Sean O'Hagen has written of the way British film and television has become to reflect the "posh" culture of the upper class while the track from grammar school to art school that gave us The Beatles and the YBA artists is no more.

Belatedly, universities are recognising that crude ATAR scores limit the kinds of students that enter their hallowed halls and are now making allowances for "social disadvantage". This has had some impact, but students have to recognise that they are disadvantaged before applying.

This year COFA at the University of New South Wales has gone further, and encouraged all applicants to combine ATAR scores with a portfolio assessment. According to the college's Director of Student Experience Scott East and Associate Dean Graham Forsyth, who are monitoring progress, approximately 40% of the portfolio students come from the less affluent Western Sydney and Southern Sydney/ Illawarra regions.

The question is – will the success of these students signal the return of some kind of equality?