

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Nothing authentic in an artless argument

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It may well be that the “National Indigenous Visual Arts Action Plan, 2021-2025”, which the government released late last week, contains some worthwhile initiatives. But it was hard not to be struck by a statement tucked away among the indicators of “what success looks like”.

Success, it tells us, will be achieved when “inauthentic products are no longer able to be produced or sold in the Australian market”.

Now, with “be yourself” having replaced “know yourself” as the overriding purpose of life, “authentic” has become the “hooray!” word of the age, while the merest hint of “inauthenticity” elicits a hearty round of boos and hisses.

Even so, it is scarcely unreasonable for readers to wonder quite what “inauthentic products” are, and why the government views them as a Very Bad Thing.

The action plan itself is utterly silent in that respect. Rather, the answer, it seems, is to be found in the report of an inquiry by the House of Representatives’ Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, which examined “the impact of inauthentic art and craft in the style of First Nations peoples”.

The first item in the inquiry’s terms of reference was to determine “the definition of authentic

art and craft products”. Unfortunately, the committee concluded that establishing such a definition “may not be feasible”.

Of course, that didn’t stop the committee from using “authentic” and its antonyms 495 times in 76 pages of text; nor did it get in the way of a range of sweeping assertions and recommendations, which apparently secured the committee’s unanimous approval.

At their heart lies a “fundamental point”: that “First Nations art, craft and cultural expressions” – which includes all the subjects, symbols, themes and motifs found in Indigenous works – “belong to First Nations peoples”.

As a result, “non-Indigenous artists should not appropriate this expression in any way”, where simply using those items (such as rows of evenly spaced dots) constitutes “appropriation” and renders a work “inauthentic”.

Regardless of whether that use is entirely legal under the copyright laws that protect Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists alike, those “inauthentic products” should consequently be eliminated from the market, with the sole exception of works whose creators have authorisation from, and pay financial compensation to, “First Nations people”.

To reach that conclusion, the report – which is singularly unburdened either by any understanding of four centuries of Western debate on aesthetic authenticity or by any serious knowledge of the development of Indigenous iconography – starts from the premise that non-Indigenous Australians cannot “truly appreciate”, and hence appropriately use, “Indigenous symbology”, broadly defined.

That claim not only flies in the face of the remarkable work of artists ranging from Margaret Preston to Ray Beamish and Elizabeth Durack; it also ignores the obvious fact that Indigenous subjects, motifs and symbols form an integral part of the lived experience of all Australians, regardless of their parentage or ethnicity.

Far from advancing the cause of aesthetic authenticity, preventing non-Indigenous artists from drawing on that iconography – just as they do on that of our myriad other cultures – could

only restrict their capacity to authentically express the life experience that underpins their work.

Nor does the report's emphasis on the supposedly timeless, spiritual dimension of Indigenous iconography help its cause.

In reality, many of the dominant aesthetic features of contemporary Indigenous art, even in remote communities, are extremely recent, and were shaped both by dramatic changes in physical mediums – notably the use of raw linen and thinned acrylics, resulting in flat, stained surfaces that bear no resemblance to traditional barks and pigments – and by international trends in modern art, including through the influence of minimalism at Papunya and of neo-expressionism at Warlpiri.

Additionally, there has, in the past few decades, been extensive borrowing of iconographic elements between otherwise very different Indigenous communities, severing the spiritual aspect of the iconographic repertoire from its artistic use.

It is, for example, striking that the cover of the Productivity Commission's recent issues paper about "inauthentic" works in the market for Indigenous art features – without any awareness of the resulting irony – a painting by a Wiradjuri (NSW) artist that is largely constructed out of Central Australian motifs and makes no reference whatsoever to the visual or spiritual traditions of the Western Slopes and Plains.

But even putting all that aside, it is absurd to claim that the spiritual dimension of a theme or symbol should constrain its artistic use. It is not only Christians who can meaningfully draw on the iconography of the crucifixion, as Chagall heart-wrenchingly showed in his series on the destruction of the Jewish people; nor could anyone seriously contend that the intense Lutheran symbolism of Bach's music, so persuasively demonstrated by British cellist and music scholar Steven Isserlis, implies that Yehudi Menuhin's brilliant direction of Bach's great church cantata, *Ich Habe Genug*, was in any sense "fake".

Those considerations clearly never crossed the committee's mind; instead, its focus was on the deep "hurt" the "inauthentic" works allegedly cause.

One might well question whether anyone could sensibly be as grievously offended as the committee says Indigenous Australians are by the sale of \$5 plastic boomerangs or of tin-plate didgeridoos; and it is even harder to believe both that those sales cause crippling spiritual pain, and that the pain could be removed by a modest royalty payment.

However, the more important point is that it is not only Indigenous people who are capable of feeling serious offence. On the contrary, many religious Australians are appalled by works such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1989), a photograph of a crucifix immersed in the artist's urine, or by caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

If the committee and the government wish – however foolishly – to reverse the trend that has prevailed since the 18th century and reinvigorate laws against sacrilege, they should therefore have the courage to do so for all Australians, rather than favouring one group alone.

In short, there is not a single aspect of the committee's case that is convincingly made out; as for its recommendations, they would place our intellectual property laws on a racial basis, which would be undesirable in itself and damaging to those laws' integrity and effectiveness. That the government has accepted the committee's goal of banning "inauthentic products" is consequently all the more worrying.

There is, nonetheless, a shred of good news: an interdepartmental committee is, it seems, producing an "information standard for authenticity". And wait for it, that standard is being designed "in a similar manner to that used for free-range eggs". Surely, when art, along with what little is left of clear thought, has been scrambled into an omelette, it's high time to say "an oeuf is enough".