

# Art and the industry



*The Dealer is the Devil* is Adrian Newstead's guide to the Australian Indigenous art industry. He spoke to **Clive Tilsley**.

## Why is the book called *The Dealer is the Devil*?

While working on the book for more than six years I tossed around many titles. Early favourites like *Black Magic* and *Black Art—White Walls* were a window into an aspect of the story but ranged from being not engaging enough to politically difficult. My wife suggested *The Dealer is the Devil*. It fits perfectly into the zeitgeist of the past 30 years. The most frequently asked question during the first decade of our involvement in art dealing was: 'How much is the artist getting out of this?' Buyers always seemed to assume that it was the dealers who were making all the money. In the end I thought that a controversial title would prompt more people to read it.

## There are some wonderful images of people and paintings in the book. Was it difficult to get permission to use these? Do you have to be careful not to transgress Indigenous culture with their inclusion?

The restriction on using images of deceased people only lasts for a finite period depending on the tribe and culture. It is far easier to get permission to use images when you have known the artists and are in touch with their families than if you have to go through an impersonal copyright collecting agency.

## Can you give a brief explanation of the theorem set out by Richard Bell in his artwork and accompanying manifesto? Did it help the cause?

In Bell's *Theorem: Aboriginal Art—It's a White Thing*, Richard Bell argued that Aboriginal art had become nothing more than a commodity. That its ascendance into the realm of elite contemporary art had been the result of a sustained marketing strategy by non-Aboriginal people. That the Aboriginal art industry was controlled by white anthropologists and western art dealers, and that they conspired to condemn Aboriginal art to non-Aboriginal control. While I found his arguments compelling, they were overly simplistic and the way in which he dismissed the passion and hard work of so many good 'white' people lacked grace. I share Bell's outrage at recent moves to spackle over the inconvenient truths of black/white history and relations. But I have too much respect for the importance of reconciliation to follow him all the way. The notion that Aboriginal spirituality is exploited by galleries as a way to 'close the deal' is dangerously reductionist.

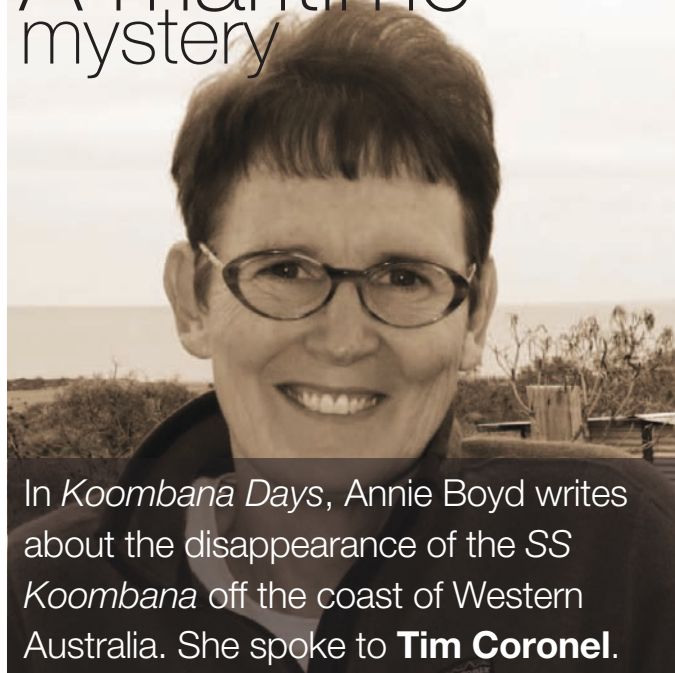
*The Dealer is the Devil* is published by Brandl & Schlesinger in February.

What was the last book you read and loved?

*The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* by Bill Gammage (A&U).



# A maritime mystery



In *Koombana Days*, Annie Boyd writes about the disappearance of the SS *Koombana* off the coast of Western Australia. She spoke to **Tim Coronel**.

## The amount of primary-source research for the book is daunting! How many sources did you consult, and how long did it take?

It's difficult to be precise. It is certainly thousands of hours. Unfortunately, some of the documents of greatest interest and value are also the most difficult to locate and reproduce. The *Koombana Days* website will include transcriptions of about 2500 primary source documents: newspaper reports, personal letters, telegrams, court records and so forth.

## The *Koombana* was lost in a cyclone in 1912. Other than some floating wreckage recovered a few weeks later, has the wreck ever been located? Are people still looking?

*Koombana* has proved extremely elusive. Since 1980 there have been several well-organised searches. All have failed. Hopes ran very high in January 1985 when an RAAF Orion aircraft detected a magnetic signature on the seabed very close to where the *Koombana* was thought to lie. But a navy patrol vessel brought in to confirm the discovery found nothing.

## *Koombana Days* has a distinctive weave of maritime disaster and social history. How did that come about?

I would like to be able to claim this as a bright idea, but it flows naturally from the fact that none of *Koombana's* complement survived to say what occurred. At first I worried that the completeness of the disappearance would make my task difficult, but as the human story coalesced I saw things differently. The mystery of *Koombana* now seems like a blessing. Because nothing was known of the ship's final hours, I turned my attention to the lives and circumstances of those lost, and to their reasons for being aboard. The alliance with social history was easy and natural, and I ran with it.

## In *Koombana Days* you also touch on a number of other ships that were lost on the North-West route in the early part of the 20th century. Are there more books in the works to tell their stories?

Tentatively, yes. For two years I have given *Koombana Days* my undivided attention, but before that I had a second project progressing in parallel. I was intrigued by a cluster of 19th-century shipwrecks along Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef. The wrecks—some identified and some not—are all within 20 nautical miles of Point Cloates. There is something strange about the ocean currents in this area, and some remarkable parallels between the accidents.

*Koombana Days* is published by Fremantle Press in December (WA) and February (other territories).

What was the last book you read and loved?

Tracy Farr's *The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt* (Fremantle Press).

