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## No Boundaries Tour Brings Indigenous Art to America By Jeremy Eccles



Dennis Scholl with Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, a Pintupi painter and one of the "lost tribe" mob who came out of the desert in 1984.

It's considered the Holy Grail of Aboriginal art – persuading the world that the work of artists operating in the "oldest continuous tradition of visual art on earth" (Robert Hughes, *Time* 1988) is also absolutely contemporary. Too often, noses are turned up and the word 'ethnographic' gets attached to canvases or barks that come from the deserts, The Kimberley or Arnhemland. For there is also a reluctance to use 'art words' like Abstract or Expressionist about work that may also be portraying maps, secret/sacred information or ancestral stories.

Dennis Scholl has none of that reluctance. The dynamic American has been collecting and commissioning non-Indigenous art since 1978, developed his own showcase in Miami called World Class Boxing (after the previous occupants of the building) for his 1000+ collection, and has employed serious curators to mould exhibitions and write catalogues. He has cred.

And now he's using that credibility to persuade some of the best US contemporary art museums to make their walls available for a newly developed Aboriginal art collection – 200 works gathered since 2008, when he was first challenged to consider Aboriginal art as Abstraction. "I had my epiphany moment in the basement of the Art Gallery of NSW," he said on a buying trip to Darwin in 2014. "I'd seen only tourist art before and was unexcited. But discovering Tjumpo Tjampitjinpa and Alma Webou in Sydney convinced me to head home and tell my wife (who has one of the two votes needed to buy anything), 'You won't believe what we're going to do next!'"

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Scholl admits that he and Debra had "grown a little tired of the cult of personality and money that the contemporary art world had become", so was looking to "re-energise". It helped that the global financial crisis had dampened down the market and quality Aboriginal art was appearing at auctions like the Lavertys in early 2013. "We looked at thousands of works online, but we need one work by each artist in the flesh to get the feel," he explained.

Once selected, the hunt was on for eight or nine works by each artist they'd decided to concentrate on – all male at first. Tjumpo from Balgo started the flow, but Butcher Cherel, Ngarra, Paddy Bedford, Boxer Milner and Billy Thomas – all Kimberley men – followed, then Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri ("Last of the Nomads") and Tommy Mitchell from the deserts, and the one-off Prince of Wales from Darwin.

Scholl had seen survey shows of Aboriginal art in the US. He recalls sitting and watching the crowds at one in Seattle and observing "so many spiritual moments amongst viewers, I was gob-smacked. But that show told stories. We're different; we're showing the abstract work of artists who are simply some of the best at it in the world".

But how had the Scholls persuaded museums of the calibre of the new Perez Museum in Miami, the Charles H Wright in Detroit ("the largest Afro- American museum in the country"), and the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art to take their show? After all, former Australian National Gallery Director Brian Kennedy had failed to woo any museum in the country to take a show he was trying to tour in 2007. "I do have a lot of relationships," was the cool response. "I picked wisely, and, as with my experience of bringing Barossa Grenache wine into the US, I believed in the product – they're both incredibly compelling."

Most compelling of all, perhaps was Scholl persuading Jens Hoffman, world biennial curator and deputy director of the Jewish Museum in New York, to write an essay for the catalogue contextualising art by old, dusty and mostly now-dead Aboriginal men with that of the hottest of current New York painters.