

Echoing across the pond: Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, 1987–2014

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Christian Thompson, We Bury Our Own, exhibition view, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, 2012; image courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne





Papunya Tula Artists, Travelling Through Country, exhibition view, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne, 2013; image courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

After nearly three decades supporting and showcasing Aboriginal contemporary art across the world, Melbourne's Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi closed its doors in late December 2014. The announcement triggered ripples of lament across the industry, for the gallery was its flagship. The maritime analogy is apt as the gallery was the first to set its sights across the pond. Braving unknown waters, Pizzi took contemporary art by our first peoples beyond our ocean borders to far-flung countries at a time when government-backed promotional efforts had lapsed and Australia's public institutions were still only tentatively acquiring Aboriginal art for their contemporary collections.¹

Back on terra firma, Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi provided the bedrock on which many other fine establishments have since been able to build and cement their reputations. There were others in the industry working in foundational capacities at the same time,² but Pizzi rightly earned her trailblazer label, taking works to contemporary biennales and art fairs across Europe and touring collections to Russia, Israel, India and South Korea long before others, and with a flair and sophistication that set her apart from those doing important work at the same time in Australia.

Curator/collector Ace Bourke believes Pizzi and Sydney's Hogarth Galleries 'played leading roles in the "mainstreaming" of Aboriginal art',³ but that Gabrielle Pizzi

'raised the bar'. Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art Curator Diane Moon, who worked as an art adviser at Maningrida in the 1980s, insists Pizzi was 'way out front'. Artist Destiny Deacon once referred to Bourke as 'Sydney's Gabrielle Pizzi – without the money', and there is no doubt that Pizzi's means – private purse and connections – provided opportunities, but it was her vision and tenacity, her panache as an operator that enabled her to turn opportunity into commercial success.

Bourke was Pizzi's friend and yet thinks of her as 'enigmatic and mysterious'. He speaks of her taste, discretion and high standards as the keys to the gallery's achievements, along with Pizzi being 'more attuned than others to urban-based artists coming through', which she promoted to great success in contemporary international forums, such as the Venice Biennale.

Pizzi was also adept at identifying stand-out artists from among those working in remote centres. Returning from living in Italy in 1980, she was captivated by the 'astonishing' art from Papunya Tula and was one of their greatest supporters. Pizzi is on record stating that support for emerging artists is 'crucial to the cultural health of the nation'.⁴ Commenting on the gallery's closing, Samantha Pizzi (who has run the gallery in the ten years since her mother's death) considers their promotion of emerging



Gabrielle Pizzi; image courtesy Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

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contemporary artists and the long lists of first solo shows by now prominent artists among the gallery’s proudest achievements.

Gabriella Roy, founder of Sydney’s Aboriginal & Pacific Art, also shared experiences working with Pizzi in the late 1980s, recalling ‘she was always kind and very generous sharing information. Later, we looked upon her gallery as an exemplar in the Aboriginal art sector.’

Diane Moon reflects on Pizzi’s grace and determination: ‘She would visit Maningrida wearing black silk, and was willing to push the truck out of a sand bog when necessary.’ Moon is quick to highlight that Pizzi’s focus on quality also brought out the best in people: ‘You wouldn’t want to do the wrong thing – she made you want to give her only the best.’ Moon talks about Pizzi with love and laughter, and in a beautiful expression of the power of character and friendship, she tells of Pizzi being one of only two people she always keeps in mind for their absolute steadfast commitment to the creative relationship – the special expectations and bonds that exist between artists, art centres and the dealer. This is offered with reverence and repeated almost mantra-like.

Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi’s legacy will live on in our cultural history as a landmark gallery among a seminal generation of players. Its founder lives on in the hearts and minds of those who continue in her footsteps, showcasing

our country’s incredibly rich contemporary art from a culture unique to the world.

1. And they were not effective crossing the ethnocentric divide – for a comprehensive review of these efforts, see Nina Berrell, ‘Inroads offshore: The international exhibition program of the Aboriginal Arts Board, 1973–1980’, *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 13–30.

2. Among them: Ace Bourke and Helen Hansen at Hogarth Galleries, which closed in 2010 and from whom Gabrielle Pizzi sourced many of her early collection acquisitions; Adrian Newstead who founded Sydney’s Coo-ee Gallery in 1981, and who recently penned an insider’s book on the industry (*The Dealer is the Devil: An Insider’s History of the Aboriginal Art Trade*, with Ruth Hessey, Brandl & Schlesinger, 2014); Christopher Hodges’s Utopia Art Sydney and Gabriella Roy’s Aboriginal & Pacific Art, both residing at the Danks Street arts complex in Sydney’s Waterloo.

3. All quotations in this article (unless otherwise stated) were drawn from conversations with the author in December 2014.

4. See Michael Hutak, ‘Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi: International style’, *Art Collector*, no. 17, July–September 2001.

Acknowledging Gabrielle Pizzi and her gallery’s success – a glossary: Ability, Boldness, Commitment, Discernment, Energy, Ferocity, Grace, Humour, Integrity, Justness, Kudos, Legacy, Means, Networking, Opportunity, Passion, Questing, Risk-taker, Style-maker, Tenacity, Unwavering, Visionary, Welcoming, the X factor!, Yearning, Zeal.