

Iconoclast

A Crusade

Echo Point is a magnet of sorts; for tourists; for the suicidal. And, for would be spiritual saviours. A couple of years ago Vesna Tenodi, disciple of the esoteric teachings of Anan-Do, archaeologist, translator and community worker, was making a leisurely visit to the famous tourist spot. Echo Point's magnificent vista, encompassing the Three Sisters and Narrow Neck gorge, had attracted the usual multi-national hordes the day Vesna decided to visit. She was drawn, however, to another of Echo Point's fixtures. It was there she first discovered Goomblar fifteen years ago. Bare chest covered with thick white paint, boomerang in one hand, didge in the other, Goomblar knows what the tourists want. He embodies everything they think they know about indigenous Australians. After seeing Goomblar travellers can tick off seeing a real live Aborigine from their list of things to do.

Goomblar struck Vesna, too, as some kind of link to a grand past. The sound of his didgeridoo, carried by the icy wind that blows in from the Megalong valley, a wind that sears cheeks red and burns lungs like fire, mesmerised the Croatian expat. She was drawn to him; and in January 2009, she had to speak to him again. She had no choice. "I should write a book about these mysterious people," she thought, "why not start right now?" She was struck, then and there, with her undeniable life mission: to resurrect "a glorious culture just waiting to be reawakened." If only she had used her spiritual insight to divine the trouble that she would get herself into.

At her ModroGorje (Croatian for Blue Mountains) wellness and art centre, situated opposite the Katoomba RSL, Vesna began work on the DreamRaisers initiative. She would speak to Goomblar at length and write a book about what he said. The book would be named *Dreamtime Set in Stone: The Truth about the Australian Aborigines, as requested by the Those-Who-Know*, and it would feature illustrations depicting sacred Aboriginal Wanjina, painted by artist Gina Sinozich. This completed, Vesna Tenodi would commission a giant sandstone Wanjina, created by artist and high school teacher, Ben Osváth. To ensure maximum exposure, the sculpture was placed on the lawn in front of the gallery. Perhaps those patrons exiting the RSL, having lost their week's wage, look to this representation for some kind of guidance. It pissed just about everyone else right off.

The Aboriginal community became apoplectic with rage at the perceived lack of sensitivity displayed by Tenodi and her collaborators (all of European descent). Both the content of the book and her use of sacred images, apparently without permission from Aboriginal elders, were criticised by some members of the community. Local and state newspapers carried stories about the controversy, giving Vesna plenty of opportunity to cement her image as an unhinged troublemaker. She spoke her mind, untainted by PR spin. She was strident in defence of her work, and the work of the artists she commissioned.

Death threats were issued; the statue was attacked with an axe. But perhaps the most intriguing event took place at the launch of *Dreamtime Set in Stone*. In December 2009 a group of protesters, including Goomblar, gathered in front of ModroGorje Wellness and Art Centre, in an attempt to stop the launch of the book and the exhibition of Wanjina paintings. The group forced their way into the

gallery. Goomblar, the man who Vesna described as “a wonderful man,” and the inspiration for the entire project, grabbed the book and ripped it apart. The stage was set for an ugly battle.

It is with full knowledge of these volatile circumstances that I decide to contact Ms. Tenodi. After reading every press article concerning her and her seemingly insane determination to anger everyone in the mountains, as well as reading her book, I'm sure I'm in for a crazy conversation with a stereotypical, delusional spiritualist. Perhaps anticipating my prejudice, Ms. Tenodi emails me the following before our conversation: “The core of this matter (and my personal interest) is artistic freedom, but that's inseparable from social issues such as freedom of thought and expression, there is also a matter of place of Aboriginal community in broader society today and the rights and responsibilities of both the 'black' and 'white' community.” That doesn't sound so crazy, does it? I immediately begin to think about things differently. Shouldn't artists have the right to create whatever they want, if they feel genuine inspiration?

The seed of trouble was planted with the publication of the book. It is essentially a treatise on the state of Aboriginal culture today, based on conversations with Goomblar. I ask Vesna what, exactly, is this “truth” that she purports to have discovered. Her answer begins reasonably enough: “The truth is there is the core knowledge, universal laws that are encapsulated in the dreamtime that has been forgotten.” However, she quickly reminds me of why I chose to interview her, “That's what I'm talking about, the Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal in each of us; everyone has a core being that yearns for more than materialistic things, and they don't know how to go about it, there is no one to tell them how, other than the Those-Who-Know.” She giggles as she finishes this sentence. I'm getting frustrated with all the teasing references to the Those-Who-Know. Who and what are they? “That will be explained in the next book.”

It is clear the book has essentially been self published (by Anan Press). To describe *Dreamtime* in a nutshell, it contains segments beginning with a page or two of generalised musings from Ms. Tenodi, followed by *verbatim* transcripts of the conversations with Goomblar. It seems doubtful that the book ever touched the hand of an editor. It was, at times, very difficult to follow. Page after page of dialogue tested my attention span. Goomblar's story *is* interesting, and inspirational, but could be edited down to something a little more digestible. What kept me reading was the joy in finding out just how far Tenodi could dig herself into a politically incorrect hole. Take this gem as an example: “Yes, you might say, they are pitiful creatures (Aborigines), especially those staggering in drunken stupor, wandering the streets of Sydney”. It's not exactly an inaccurate summation of white man's persistent attitude toward indigenous Australians; we just don't like being reminded.

Elsewhere, amongst pages of impenetrable esoteric text, she *appears* to refer to Aborigines as an inferior spiritual “third race”, in comparison to the superior fifth race, in which modern white man is positioned. She clears this up for me as best she can: “The spiritual lack... practical skills and they ignore material reality. They are very unreliable.” In contrast she states that the fourth race was populated with “practical and pragmatic people (who) usually cause wars and the destruction of civilization.” She casually deals with my probing on this issue by stating that it “goes back to theosophy, which is a pretty accurate account of the development of civilizations and the human race, and it's actually a compliment, showing the longevity and survival of the third race, its ability to adapt.” The book doesn't make this clear. I put this to her, stating that perhaps the general public

might have similar interpretations to myself. "Thanks for bringing this to my attention," she says sounding genuinely surprised. "This is new to me", she continues, "no one mentioned it and now I can see how it could be misunderstood. The third race is something wonderful."

Vesna Tenodi's spiritual life is guided by Master Ananda, founder of the teachings of Anan-Do. The following information was gleaned from what I could find on the internet, Vesna being rather vague about her spiritual background: "*The Master-of-the-next-level, Master Ananda, is a mystic, who opts for anonymity. Working with a core group of aspirant-participants, Master Ananda provides teaching, writings and discourses on mysticism – as a method of attaining self-knowledge by recognising the impulse from the soul, and fostering that line of communication.*" The theosophy she speaks of she attributes to the teachings of Helena Blavatsky, an esoteric philosopher and founder of new age thinking. Vesna has been portrayed in the press, thanks to the tireless efforts of her detractors, as some kind of spiritual weirdo. "Well, they're shooting themselves in the foot, they are spitting on their own culture. The Dreamtime is built on the spiritual world".

After thinking about all this for a few days I'm struck with a feeling of complete stupidity. It was with slavish haste that I boarded the bandwagon of political correctness. "How can she be so inconsiderate?" I asked my self upon reading the initial press reports. Yes, there are problems with the book, which make it hard to take seriously. But how else can something so politically incorrect as this be published, other than paying for it yourself, or getting your "teachers" to fork out the cash.

Aboriginal culture has reached a stage where it is *unwise* for a white person to comment on, or take part in it without some kind of permission. But Goomblar's comments *are* valid. As far as the artwork is concerned, some would say that in the postmodern age everything is up for grabs. The public outcry in Denmark that followed the cartoon portrayal of Mohammed was largely *in favour* of the artist; the very notion that politics and religion should hinder artful expression seemed outrageous to most. "Who is to say that my artists were not Aborigines in their previous lives, why can't they be inspired by Aboriginal culture," Vesna says. She isn't depicting these images in a negative light; she is depicting spiritual images that have nourished the souls of Australia's first inhabitants for generations. She recognised the impulse in her own soul and followed it *without question*.

Vesna says it's a case of "political correctness gone mad". From my perspective, it seems reasonable that there can be no claim on spirituality. One needs only to spend a short time in the bush to feel it, to be inspired by the vastness and sense of timelessness. Isn't it a good thing that these Aboriginal cultural images are inspiring real artists, and not passed off as cheap souvenirs? Or maybe there is something darker going on here. Anger at an ignorant wog, meddling with an ancient culture she has no idea about.

Vesna says the Aboriginal community "failed the test", that her work could only be truly appreciated by the spiritually enlightened. "It was deliberately only aimed at the members of the Aboriginal community who haven't completely lost touch with their tradition and they would immediately recognise what it was, and they failed to do so. They are completely disconnected from their own tradition and by ridiculing what I'm saying they are just giving me more evidence that the need to revive the culture is urgent, because it *is* dying. That upset them, but it's like an alcoholic, you have to

admit there is a problem. You can solve it only if you accept the unpalatable truth." Vesna, it seems, is here "to revive it all".

If you are going to pass judgement on a group of people, in print, you had better have some solid research based evidence. This is Vesna's downfall, as far as the book is concerned. Vesna sees no issue in relying on one person, an individual who has indeed interpreted Aboriginal culture in his own way, for an account of that culture as it exists today. "This is only the first part; the second part will include input from other people."

Vesna has no idea why Goomblar reacted the way he did. He must have been "brainwashed", made to believe he did something wrong by speaking his mind. But was he brainwashed by Vesna, lulled into a false sense of security, her true intentions hidden at all times? "I only tell people what they *need* to know." Was that a strategy she used because she thought this might happen? "No, no one could have predicted it but every journalist uses that strategy. You don't tell people what you know, and you don't ask them questions because you don't know the answers, but because you want to hear what *they* are going to say."

Despite the rift with Goomblar, and the fact that all communication between them has ceased, Vesna still speaks very affectionately of "this wonderful man". Recalling her confusion about his actions Vesna is not hesitant in praising him. "He is talking about letting go of resentment. He is a wonderful example of that. He works for a living and if you see his kids they are so wonderful and beautifully mannered and polite and he is a wonderful father, and whichever role you see him in he is a wonderful person." Did she let him read the book before it was published? "I asked him if he wanted to read it before it's published and he said 'no, it's too big for me, I wouldn't be able to'".

In the face of so much opposition Vesna is determined to continue her work. Does she expect things to get worse? "Well, I also expect things to get better because so many people are rallying behind us. There is a sentiment among artists; they don't want to be dictated to about what they can or cannot be inspired by. There is also a great excitement amongst people; they just want to reclaim their right to be inspired by whatever they want." In response to this "excitement" Vesna says she is going to start a competition: "I'll invite every artist on earth to paint Wanjina." This comment has a tinge of petulance that colours some of her more antagonistic statements. Concerning the Wanjina sculpture, she made a similarly jarring assertion: "The stone has become a landmark. Soon it will be better known around the world than the Three Sisters." It's little wonder she has divided the mountain community. She assures me that many people *do* support her, but are afraid to speak out for fear of retribution.

Most of the opposition toward Vesna's activities have crystallised into the issue of permission, or the lack thereof. Chris Tobin, a member of the Darug people who works as a guide with the National Parks and Wildlife Service says "it's totally inappropriate for a non-indigenous person to be doing Wanjinias, especially without permission." He says Aboriginal law is very specific on what you can and can't do with Wanjinias. The owner of Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery in Bondi, Adrian Newstead, drove straight for the moral highroad saying that local Aborigines have every right to be disgusted. "Only a few Aboriginal artists ever win the right to depict Wanjina, and only then after years of

initiations and ceremonies. And then this artist rocks up and says, 'Bugger all that; I'll just do whatever I like'".

This is an understandable position for a white person who essentially *controls* the market. Obviously he wouldn't want the market flooded with inauthentic Aboriginal art. Vesna sticks to her guns: "We are doing art *inspired* by Aboriginal spirituality; we never said we are doing Aboriginal art."

Of course, this is not the first time a non-indigenous person has been criticised for appropriating Aboriginal artistic styles. Artists such as Margaret Preston, Elizabeth Durack, and Imants Tillers have all been inspired by Aboriginal symbolism. Durack famously created Aboriginal art under the pseudonym Eddie Burrup. The Aboriginal community reacted angrily to this as did the gallery representing "Burrup". The Durack case held some important ethical issues and the Aboriginal community certainly had a right to be angry.

However, Vesna, and the artists she commissions, have never hidden the fact that they are not Aboriginal. A newspaper in Croatia made the connection crystal clear: "This places Gina Sinozich, and her brave imagery, for which even some Aboriginal representatives said are impressive and brilliant body of work, to that very top of the art elite, those who defy any restriction on artistic freedom." While replicating an ancient style hardly deserves "elite" status, her refusal at her art being defined by cultural boundaries can certainly be commended, in a world where we walk on cultural eggshells.

There are strong points of view on both sides of this debate. It began at Echo Point, at the edge of a cliff surrounded by the never ending bush. Stare out across any valley in the Blue Mountains long enough and reality begins to recede. The bush is hypnotising. It engulfs the senses; disorients the mind. It can be deadly when taken lightly. It's a place that holds a great power and many mysteries. People disappear. Some are found alive, wandering aimlessly, clinging to life and sanity. Aboriginal spirituality is like the blue haze that emanates from the gum trees, ephemeral and largely illusory when one attempts to grasp it as a whole. We may have been tricked into believing that Aboriginal culture is something that can be fixed, by government policy or in some more artful manner.

Vesna discovered that even with the best intentions, a merciless quagmire awaits anyone determined to enter such politically charged terrain. Theresa Bayer said that artists are the proverbial canaries in the coalmine. What will happen if artists stop singing? If an artist cannot express themselves any way they want, if they are allowed inspiration only from a politically sanctioned list, then the implications for society are grave, to say the least.

Katoomba was once a mining town and it thrived thanks to those little yellow birds. The canaries are singing again, but will we heed their warning?