



FORMER CEO CHARGED WITH RIPPING OFF ABORIGINAL ARTIST AND ART CENTRE

A former CEO of an Aboriginal art centre on remote Mornington Island, Queensland, is facing 35 charges of using his position dishonestly with the intention of directly gaining a personal advantage. The charges against Mr Brett Evans follow an investigation by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations into sales of Aboriginal artworks including those by preeminent artist, the late Sally Gabori.

The charges were filed by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions on 21 May 2020 in the Brisbane Magistrates Court.

Mr Evans worked at the Mirndiyau Gununa Aboriginal Corporation from 1990 to 2014. Starting as a clerk, around 2005 he was promoted to art centre manager/coordinator. He became CEO in 2011 and remained in that position until he resigned in 2014.

The corporation was first incorporated in 1983 and is one of the longest established art and cultural organisations in Australia. Its main purpose is maintaining and promoting the traditional cultures of the Lardil and Kaiadilt people—through dance, music, visual art and storytelling—as well as assisting other Gulf cultures and communities to do the same. Its primary activity for achieving its objective is operating an art centre known as Mornington Island Art, or MIArt.

Over the 24 years of his employment at the corporation Mr Evans developed significant industry knowledge and relationships with artists, galleries and collectors. It is alleged he used his position as CEO to carry out misleading deals that ultimately benefited him personally.

‘Exploitation of Indigenous artists is a chronic blight on the art industry. Commonly it’s middlemen “carpetbaggers” with no strings attached taking advantage of the vulnerable. In this case it’s a person from within, now formally accused of abusing trust and loyalty,’ the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, Selwyn Button said. ‘Our message to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists is: your culture and story are not a commodity for others to exploit.’

‘There’s not much that can be done to help corporations and communities left in the wake of selfish and reckless individuals. Instead I urge all corporations to protect themselves from unscrupulous behaviour by making sure record keeping is up to scratch. The paper story of decisions made can answer a lot of questions and safeguard corporations from trouble makers.’

Mr Evans is required to appear in the Mornington Island Magistrates Court on Tuesday, 14 July 2020.



Background

Mirdidkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori (1924–2015) was a Kaiadilt woman from Bentinck Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria and a distinguished contemporary Aboriginal artist. She was known for colourful and expressive abstract paintings centred on her connection to country. Her art is held in numerous collections in Australia and internationally.

A director or officer who dishonestly uses their position for personal gain commits an offence under section 265-25(3)(a) of the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* which carries a maximum penalty of 2000 penalty units, imprisonment for five years, or both.

Media contact

Lisa Hugg
0477 762 290 or (02) 6150 6237
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