

ARTS PHOTOGRAPHY



Capturing the market in Australiana

Foreigners like our landscape photographs more than we do, writes **Hannah Tattersall**.

The cayenne earth pierced with spinifex reveals a path, eastwards, towards Uluru. The great red rock is perched against a cerulean sky.

The image, photographed by Australian Peter Lik, is called *Red Dawn*. It's the type of image coveted by a large and rapidly expanding international audience – but not always by locals, who don't view the work as high art.

As for the international admirers, some are tourists, while others have never even set foot in our sunburnt country.

Lik is just one photographer who carved out a niche and made a bucketload of cash capturing panoramas of his native land.

Other well-known artists include Ken Duncan and Mark Gray. Steve Parish has been photographing Australia for more than 50 years and is now re-photographing some locations for updated versions of his books.

Their paths may have been partly laid by Australian painter Ken Done, whose art, clothing and souvenir empire is worth millions of dollars. However, Done denies he is the doyen of the Australiana movement.

"It's right to say that in 1980, when we produced the first Sydney Harbour T-shirt, there really wasn't a lot you could buy that told you Sydney was a stylish and sophisticated place," says Done, whose paintings sell for between \$10,000 and \$100,000.

The former advertising art director, who was 40 when he had

his first exhibition, says he didn't set out to become involved in the business of Australiana.

"I just wanted to be a painter," he says. "All the time I was painting but what people were seeing was a small part of what I was doing – but it was the part that was widely distributed."

When Done's wife Judy became involved in the business, they started making swimwear and resortwear – something they've now moved away from.

"To have somebody prepared to walk around wearing your drawing I always thought was immensely flattering," he says. Done's move into wearable art was also a way of controlling his intellectual property and making it accessible to the masses.

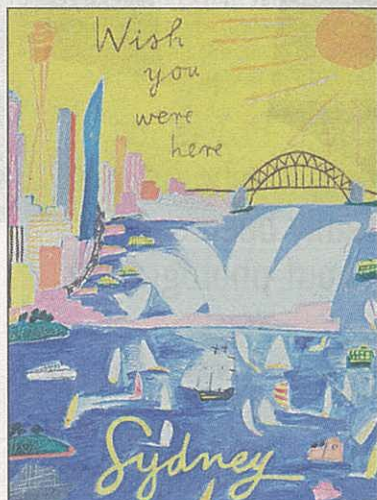
Sotheby's vice-chairman and national head of art, Geoffrey Smith, says the way Done has marketed and promoted himself is remarkable.

"It's a bit like Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons: if his work is going to be reproduced, he's in charge of it," Smith says. "If it's going to appear on placemats, he'll produce them; if it's going to appear on tea towels, he'll design the tea towel. He is in complete control of his iconography and his production, his creativity."

Done says post-Olympics, the Australiana movement in particular and the Australian tourism industry in general did not get the boost locals thought it would. The tourist spend in 2000 was \$94.5 billion. Last year this had fallen to \$89.6 billion, according to Tourism Australia.

"Everybody in Australia rather complacently thought that because the Olympics were so lovely, everybody would just flock to Australia and any tourist-related business would work," Done says.

"You have to realise you're dealing with very sophisticated consumers that are coming in from Europe, who



have seen a lot of stylish things and are not necessarily going to respond to a koala sitting on a boomerang."

Just as T-shirt sales allowed Done to pursue his painting, his prints and posters made the images in the paintings accessible and affordable.

That accessibility is something photographers such as Mark Gray speak about too.

Gray has been photographing Australian landscapes for about seven years and is working on his first coffee-table book.

His images of Australia contain vivid colours and he says what sets him apart from other photographers is he is prepared to go back to the same place 10 or 15 times to get the best light.

Ken Done is in complete control of his iconography.

Geoffrey Smith

Gray does email-outs, advertises in magazines and relies on internet marketing to get the best return on investment.

"The more prints you sell, the more advertising you're getting on people's walls as well," says Gray, whose annual turnover is increasing by 30 to 50 per cent each financial year.

Australiana features on some pretty well-known walls, too. Peter Lik, for example, can count Buzz Aldrin, Bill Clinton, Elton John, Frank Gehry and Queen Elizabeth as owners of his photographs.

Ken Duncan won't name names, but will say that members of the British royal family, a number of former US presidents and Australian prime ministers, as well as several Hollywood A-listers have purchased his work.

Gray says there are two types of consumers: people seeking a nice



photograph of a particular location and people who just appreciate the photos as art and don't care where the location is.

He calls it "accessible photography". "I'm a fairly simple photographer in terms of my compositions. I tend to leave out more than I include," he says.

"The most noticeable thing is the bright and vivid colours. Being able to capture a location at the very best time of the day and best time of year enables me to get those incredible colours."

Ken Duncan, who Gray says pioneered the landscape photographer's ability to sell limited editions, says these guys are in it for the love of the bush and being in nature, more than fame or fortune.

He says he had an epiphany the day he took his first black-and-white photograph, aged 16.

Duncan, who was told he would be the least likely student to succeed at school, has turned his love of nature into a multimillion-dollar company with a team of 50.

The Ken Duncan Group now comprises five galleries, framers, printers, a publishing company, a corporate sector and a rapidly growing website.

Duncan is embroiled in a fight for photographic freedom – fears about paedophilia and terrorism have made it increasingly difficult to photograph in public spaces.

"How does Kakadu... how does Uluru get World Heritage listing? We photographed it," he says. "We were the ones who helped them get a World Heritage listing. We didn't charge them anything for our time and yet all of a sudden we're treated like some charlatan or predator."

Certainly to many locals, these photographers are not household names. They might recognise and admire an image in a shop or on a postcard sent from the Northern Territory, but they wouldn't consider purchasing the work.

Clockwise from top: a Ken Duncan landscape; Ken Duncan Gallery at Erina Heights; Ken Done (bottom left) and one of his signature works.

Photos courtesy Ken Duncan, Ken Done.

The director of Victoria's Monash Gallery of Art, Shaune Lakin, says 19th-century Australian photography largely developed out of the "views" trade – great landscapes produced for a commercial market.

"There is a commercial imperative behind the work and it is also driven by a desire to furnish a view of a place that at once sells the virtues of the place and provides the owner of the picture with a reminder of how spectacular it was," says Lakin.

"Why is their work not being collected by major galleries? It's probably not clear at the moment what kind of critical contribution these photographers are making to the practice of photography."

"That might become clearer later on. These photographers sell their work for vast sums, because international tourists and collectors can pay."

Duncan says that although landscape photographers are seen as making huge amounts of money, most do it because they love their country, and in Duncan's case, are concerned about the environment.

"Australia's got to realise that we're in a global market now and by making things very difficult for photographers, it's going to crucify our tourism industry," he says of current laws.

"In 1982 I was one of the first people into the Bungle Bungles [now Purnululu National Park]. No one was there, no one knew anything about it. We showed photos of it and the next minute it's all locked up and sanitised."

"I'm glad I'm a photographer. Thank god I can come out here and see the beauty of creation."

