

## Celebrated in Paris and ripped off back home: an Indigenous art tale

*As the late artist Sally Gabori is feted in the top echelons of Paris, a heated debate is swirling in Australia about the art centre boss who stole from her – and whether the paintings he dishonestly sold should be handed back to her family.*



*Sally Gabori was around 80 when she first picked up a paintbrush – and became hooked.*

By **Gabriella Coslovich**  
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**It's been** an exhausting couple of days for Dorothy and Amanda Gabori. They've made the taxing 1800-kilometre journey by plane from their homes on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria all the way to Brisbane, facing delays, a cancelled flight and an unscheduled night in Cairns.

At last they're here, to receive an honour on behalf of their late mother, Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori, whose tale of painting prolifically through her 80s, and finding national and international acclaim in the process, is one of the most remarkable Australia has seen.

Sally Gabori has been named one of this year's Queensland Greats, and her daughters are here in Brisbane in early June to represent their large extended family, which includes five surviving children (of 11) and so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren that the sisters have stopped counting. "There's more coming," Dorothy, says with a grin as she finishes her eggs on toast. Amanda adds, deadpan: "It goes on and on and on, too many too count."

I meet Amanda, 56, and Dorothy, 64, at their Brisbane hotel with their helper, the gentle Sue Lee, who's known the family for more than a decade and was with them by Gabori's side when the artist died in 2015, aged 91.

It's a big year for the Gaboris – not only has their mother been named a Queensland Great, she is starring in her first major international exhibition, in Paris at the prestigious Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, which was opened by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on July 1.



*PM Anthony Albanese at the opening of the Gabori exhibition in Paris earlier this month.*

Amanda travelled to Paris for the launch, her first time out of Australia, along with two of Sally Gabori's great-granddaughters, Narelle and Tori. Sue Lee went too, to help smooth the bumps of international travel.

"They are over the moon," says Dorothy, who is not fond of flying and stayed home. "Tori can't stop talking about Paris."

But this year of triumph for Sally Gabori has a tragic subplot, of the kind all too often associated with successful Indigenous artists from remote communities. In her final years, Gabori was cheated by the very person paid to safeguard her interests.

Brett Evans was the long-standing manager of the Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, commonly known as the Mornington Island Art Centre, where Gabori's painting life began in 2005. Evans played a central role in promoting Gabori's early career, but in February this year he was sentenced by the Mount Isa District Court to four-and-a-half years' jail for fraudulently selling 176 of her paintings while she was still alive and pocketing the money rather than distributing it between the artist and the art centre, as required by the centre's terms of business.

Evans is in jail in Brisbane, but his crime continues to reverberate. Some of the paintings he improperly sold ended up in the private collections of the rich and famous, bought in good faith by people with no knowledge of his crimes but now caught up in its aftermath.

This is not the first time the art trade has been racked by scandal and it won't be the last. But this scandal is different. It doesn't involve fakes, or the grubby deals of so-called carpetbaggers who exploit Indigenous artists by getting them to paint in sweat-shops and under other unsavoury conditions. It centres on ethically produced art dishonestly sold, a celebrated artist denied her due, and what happens to the market for her work as a result.

The debate about whether the Gabori paintings that Evans unlawfully sold should continue to be traded and hung goes to the heart of some of the key tensions in the commercial art world: who has the right to say whether a genuine work should be traded, and by whom; what happens when the gatekeepers don't all agree, or don't agree with the family; and who has the right to say that a work of art that nobody says is fake should or should not exist in the public sphere?



*From left, Sally Gabori's great-granddaughter Tori Juwarnda Wilson-Gabori, daughter Amanda Gabori Dibirdibi and great-granddaughter Narelle Gabori at the Fondation Cartier exhibition in Paris.*

Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori was around 80 years old when she first picked up a paint brush. “Absolutely everyone was surprised when, all of a sudden in 2005, she took off,” says Nicholas Evans, a linguist at the Australian National University with a long connection to Gabori and Mornington Island (and no relation to Brett Evans). “It really came out of nowhere.”

Before then, Gabori was known foremost as a shy grandmother with a talent for weaving. Belonging to the last coastal-living Aboriginal people to come into contact with Europeans, she barely spoke English and could not write her name.

Born around 1924 on the Gulf of Carpentaria’s Bentinck Island, the traditional lands of the Kaiadilt people, her name, Mirdidingkingathi, means “born at Mirdidingki,” a small creek in the island’s south, while “Juwarnda” refers to her conception totem, the dolphin. Gabori lived a traditional life, doing women’s work such as repairing the island’s stone-wall fish traps, finding shellfish and gathering plant food. As a teenager she fell in love with Kabararrjingathi Bulthuku Pat Gabori. Her older brother, King Alfred, forbid their relationship, following which Pat led an attack on King Alfred, killed him and claimed Sally as his fourth wife. The couple lived together until Pat’s death in 2009, and, I’m told, had an enduring love.

In her 20s, Gabori would face the greatest upheaval of her life. From the early 1940s, the Presbyterian missionaries on Mornington Island had been trying to persuade the Kaiadilt to move to the mission. The Kaiadilt wanted nothing of it. But in 1948, in the aftermath of a cyclone and tidal wave that contaminated Bentinck Island’s freshwater supply, they had little choice, and the 63 surviving Kaiadilt people were evacuated to the much bigger island to their north, Mornington Island. There, Mirdidingkingathi became “Sally”, the name bestowed on her by the missionaries. “Gabori” is believed to be a corruption of her husband Pat’s name, Kabararrjingathi.

Name changes were the least of the Kaiadilt’s troubles. In an all too common strategy, the Kaiadilt were forbidden to speak their language and their children taken from them and placed into dormitories. As Nicholas Evans writes in his essay for the Fondation Cartier, the Kaiadilt’s despair was so great that for several years after the move, no newborns survived. It was during this difficult time that Sally Gabori became a mother. She lost her first three children in infancy, but eventually had eight more.



*Gabori with one of her monumental works, Dibirdibi Country, 2009.*

The traditional owners of Mornington Island are the Lardil people, and the Kaiadilt believed they were only moving there temporarily. They would not return to Bentinck Island until the 1990s, however, when a small housing development was established on the island, at Nyinyilki, following land rights battles. Sally and Pat Gabori were among those who returned and resumed their traditional way of life. But their homecoming was short-lived. In the early 2000s, the lack of healthcare and funding for the community at Nyinyilki forced them back to Mornington Island, where Sally and Pat entered an old people's home.

At this advanced age, most people would happily wind down, but Gabori would soon find expression in the most vital and startling of ways. In 2005, the Mornington Island Art Centre began holding painting workshops in collaboration with Brisbane's Woolloongabba Art Gallery. At first, it was the senior Lardil men who were invited to the workshop, but the manager of the old people's home pointed out that the women needed something to do as well.

Sally Gabori wasn't all that interested in painting and asked instead to be taken out bush to gather grass to spin and weave. But Brett Evans, the art centre co-ordinator at the time, gave her a small canvas and convinced her to try. With that small

gesture, he changed the course of Gabori's final years and released one of the most original Indigenous artists Australia has seen.

Gabori's first painting, *My Country*, is small, 60cm by 30cm, and somewhat ungainly, but it hints at what's to come: paint thickly applied with assertive brush strokes, confident blocks of contrasting colour, a spontaneity and freedom that marks the beginnings of the radical abstract style for which she would become famed.

Despite her initial reticence, Gabori was hooked. She would eagerly wait for the bus to pick her up from the aged care hostel at 8.30am every weekday to take her to the art centre, and if the bus were late, she would set off on foot, determined to walk the kilometre or so.

Seven months after her first painting workshop, Gabori had her first solo exhibition, at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery that same year. Her canvases jostled with tightly-packed, colourful circles that referred to the glistening schools of fish on Bentinck Island: big black mullet, mangrove jack, black bream, yellow fish. There were paintings, too, of a turtle nest, a crocodile, rock cod swimming, hunting grounds, all rendered in big, bright, blocks of colour.



*Gabori's first painting, My Country.*

When I visit the Woolloongabba Art Gallery, a modest space on a busy road in inner Brisbane, the director, Bob Mercer, a chatty, easy-going man in his 70s, describes Gabori's first exhibition as "incredible". He gives me a copy of the catalogue, which features the artist on the cover, standing in front of one of her vibrant canvases with a big smile, wearing a polka-dotted skirt, patterned shirt and jaunty, checked bucket hat.

In the catalogue is an essay by Brett Evans, who warmly describes Gabori's transformation from being "too shy to look at people, to interrogating anyone who came into the studio". He continues: "She may even be accused of starting to dress like an artist and shows definite signs of eccentricity, wearing her stylish hats to the art centre."

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With the exhibition in tow, Evans approached respected art dealer Beverly Knight, director of Melbourne's Alcaston Gallery, to tell her about the dynamic new artist on his books. (Another influential Melbourne dealer, the late Gabrielle Pizzi, had shown no interest.) Knight flew up for the Brisbane exhibition and was immediately taken by what she saw. The following year she exhibited Gabori at the Melbourne Art Fair, and in 2007 she held the artist's first major solo show at Alcaston.

Knight held a solo Gabori exhibition practically every year after that and could be rightly said to have built the market for the artist, who she has represented as her primary dealer from late 2005. "We've never not had a sell-out exhibition of Sally's work," Knight tells me.

In 2016, following the artist's death, Knight became the art agent for the Gabori estate. "Beverly was like a second mum to us, and a sister to mum," Dorothy Gabori says.

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As Gabori's confidence grew, so did her canvases, becoming larger and bolder. Within the space of a decade, the small, unassuming woman had become an art world sensation, shown at international fairs and galleries from the Venice Biennale to London's Royal Academy of Arts, acquired by prominent private collectors such as Annabel and Rupert Myer, of the department store dynasty, by major state galleries and international institutions including Paris's Musée du Quai Branly, and commissioned by the Queensland Supreme Court and Brisbane Airport for site-specific work.

What's all the more extraordinary about Gabori's meteoric rise is the Kaiadilt do not have a tradition of rock or bark painting, and their body painting is simple. From the very beginning, Gabori was inventing a visual language of her own, joyously mapping her ancestral land in seemingly abstract works, using acrylic paint largely unmixed. Nicholas Evans suggests that Gabori's native language, Kayardilt, which defines space in topographical blocks, deeply influenced her idiosyncratic vision.

In the year after her death, Gabori was honoured with a retrospective at the Queensland Art Gallery, which subsequently travelled to the National Gallery of Victoria. "Since then, no other Aboriginal artist has explored the immediate power of paint more than her," writes Judith Ryan, a former long-time senior curator of indigenous art at the NGV, in the Fondation Cartier catalogue.



*Judith Ryan, a former senior curator of indigenous art at the NGV, says that since Gabori's death, "No other Aboriginal artist has explored the immediate power of paint more than her."*

Brett Evans is a hefty, bald, bearded man whose looks have been likened to that of media personality Rex Hunt. He's variously described to me as "lazy", "flighty", "erratic", a "poor communicator", and someone whose office was always out of bounds.

A qualified teacher, Evans arrived on Mornington Island in 1982 from Grafton, NSW, and taught for a couple of years before holding various other jobs. He started at the art centre in 1990, when it was still known as the Woomera Aboriginal Corporation. In 2005, he was appointed its co-ordinator, a role that required him to work closely with artists, supplying and preparing their materials, managing their sales and promoting their work. By 2009, he was promoted to manager, and four years later he was chief executive officer. But Evans did not see out his two-year contract as CEO; he left the art centre in 2014, as details about financial mismanagement started to emerge.

In March 2017, the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC), a federal government body set up in 1978 to oversee the running of Aboriginal corporations and ensure that they operate within the law, launched an investigation into Evans. Three years later, charges were filed by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions in Brisbane Magistrates Court, charging Evans with 35 counts of



using his position dishonestly to gain an advantage for himself. Twenty-eight of those charges related to the sale of 176 paintings by Gabori, amounting to \$415,128.

Community-run art centres are meant to be safe havens for remote Indigenous artists, places where they're shielded from exploitation. Art centre artists generally receive 50 to 60 per cent of the sale price of their works, with the remainder going to the centre to pay for materials, documentation, travel and other expenses such as staff and rent. But Evans siphoned the money for those 176 works into his own bank accounts.

Gabori was not the only artist he robbed: he dishonestly sold the artworks of seven other women too, including Gabori's daughters, Amanda and Elsie. But Gabori was the most celebrated of the artists and, as Evans himself acknowledged in court, she accounted for 90 per cent of the centre's sales.

Gabori was prolific, producing more than 2000 paintings in the last 10 years of her life. But not all of these were considered suitable for sale. Beverly Knight, in consultation with Brett Evans, had set aside paintings deemed low quality or too experimental to be sold. It's not unusual for a primary dealer to control when and how an artist's work will be sold, strategically releasing artworks for sale as a way of protecting an artist's status and market price.

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Gabori's lesser quality paintings were stored in a shipping container on Mornington Island, where they were to remain until Knight determined what to do with them. But that container proved too much of a temptation for Evans, who sold the works in it cheaply. What he did with the money is unclear. There are rumours he gambled it away.

Evans claimed Gabori gave him the paintings in gratitude for all the work he'd done for her over the years. The court rejected this story. It found that from August 2011 to September 2014, in the final years of Gabori's life, Evans faked invoices and certificates of authenticity, so that buyers thought they were paying the Mornington Island art centre for Gabori's works, not Evans himself.

In February this year, aged 62, Evans was sentenced to four-and-a-half-years' jail with a non-parole period of 20 months. He pleaded guilty to all 35 charges, sparing a lengthy and expensive trial. The court ordered him to repay the \$421,378.20 owed to the artists and art centre, but that hasn't happened. Many doubt it ever will.



*Brett Evans ran the Mornington Island Art Centre where Gabori painted – and stole from her.*

“People are angry,” says the art centre’s new manager, John Armstrong, who took over in 2018 and has had to deal with the emotional and economic fallout. “The most common response I have had is, ‘He only got four-and-a-half years, he should have got 14-and-a-half,’ because he was in the community for so long, he had family here, he was initiated here, he had kids. People felt really betrayed. And it was not just what he did to Sally, it’s what he did to the other artists as well.”

Brett Evans is married to a local artist, Emily Evans, a Lardil woman with whom he has three children. Without excusing the crime, Nicholas Evans offers another perspective on the man. “He was someone who was helping things happen,” Evans says. “As the art centre co-ordinator, he took some decisive early steps which meant that not only Sally but that whole Kaiadilt art movement took off, encouraging her, giving her a paint brush, saying, ‘Look, this could work.’ Not that he’s any form of art connoisseur at all; he’d be the first to say that.

“These were all really positive things about Brett, and the terrible thing about Brett’s story is that it’s just like, you know, a Shakespearean tragedy, of someone who starts off with a couple of flaws, like we all have, and circumstances just amplified them, and some rotten things happened because of that and it’s hurt people in the community and it’s hurt him.

“Then there was this other thing with the famous shed with all of the unsold canvases, which, yeah, it’s a sort of Pandora’s Box waiting to be opened at some point in the future. That’s what did happen and that’s when the top blew off it all.”

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**The aftershocks keep coming**, with differing opinions on whether the paintings Brett Evans dishonestly sold should be returned to the Gabori estate. For Dorothy and Amanda Gabori, the issue is clear-cut. When I meet them in Brisbane they tell me the works were “stolen” and should be given back. They describe Evans’ crime as “elder abuse”. What Evans did remains deeply hurtful to the sisters, and it’s not something they like to talk about. “He took advantage of an old lady,” Dorothy tells me in a near whisper.

Significantly, the court made no ruling on whether the paintings should be returned to the Gabori estate. Nor will ORIC be taking any further action. “ORIC investigated the fraud associated with the sale of the artworks; ownership was never in question,” the organisation wrote to me in February, when I sought clarification of the issue.

But the law is one thing, perception another. In the art trade, provenance – an artwork’s sales history – is paramount, and for some collectors the knowledge that these paintings were initially sold dishonestly may dampen their enthusiasm for owning one. As Judith Ryan puts it, “Once we have someone jailed for such an offence, it means that the works that changed hands as a result of this are tainted, so collectors would not necessarily want those on their walls.”

Ryan, who is now a senior curator at the University of Melbourne art museums, takes a strong stance. “People will say they didn’t know that this is what happened, but that’s why when you have a betrayal like this, it’s so undermining of all art centres and artists. It’s exploiting the vulnerable members of the community, which is not to be countenanced.”

Almost half the works Brett Evans dishonestly sold were bought by one of Australia’s biggest collectors of Indigenous art, well-known Sydney philanthropist Pat Corrigan, who made his fortune in the freight business. Corrigan, who bought the paintings from Evans in several lots before the crimes came to light, feels like the whipping boy in the whole Brett Evans saga. Evans did the crime, but Corrigan feels he’s in the firing line.

“Why is all the focus on me all the time?” he asks when we meet in Sydney. I suggest it’s because he bought so many Gabori paintings from Evans, at bargain-basement prices. “Why aren’t they focusing on the other people?” he responds.



*Philanthropist Pat Corrigan was one of the biggest buyers of Gabori's works.*

Court documents show that among the other buyers of the Gaboris from Evans are a medical practitioner, Andrew Clift, who travelled to Mornington Island between 2009 and 2011 as part of his work with the Mount Isa Base Hospital. Over two years, Clift bought a total of 60 works, paying \$90,000 in total (an average of \$1500 a piece). There's also Hobart gallery Art Mob, which bought 15 works over two years, paying \$52,681 (an average of \$3512); the Yaama Ganu Gallery, in the regional NSW town of Moree, which bought 12, also over two years, paying \$43,000 (an average of \$3583); and a few other individuals, including Pat Corrigan's art adviser, Adam Knight (no relation to Beverly), who bought two works for himself at a total cost of \$6000.

Corrigan is a likeable fellow. He has an ease about him, and a mischievousness that seems to act as a kind of foil. He manages to be candid and circumspect all at once. Approaching 90, controversy is the last thing he needs, especially after a lifetime building a reputation as a generous supporter of the arts. He texts me several weeks after we meet, hoping my story will be "All. Joy" and pleading with me to "Leave. Be. Controversy". Still, Corrigan didn't hesitate when I asked whether I could visit him in Sydney to discuss the Evans case and his entanglement in it.

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**At about midday** on a sunny, crisp Saturday in June, Corrigan picks me up from my hotel in his small white Suzuki. He looks dapper in a long black coat and a pair of black leather slip-ons with white sneaker-like soles. He may be almost 90, but he's not skimping on style. He puts on a pair of black designer sunglasses with mirror

lenses and off we drive toward his part of town. First, there's lunch at his favourite Double Bay café, followed by a gallery tour. Wherever we go, people warmly greet him by name and he relishes the attention.

When we finally make it to his apartment in Darling Point, several hours later, the winter sun is beginning its descent over Sydney's towers. Corrigan's apartment is a shrine to his joyfully Catholic taste for contemporary art. On display is a cacophony of styles, shapes, mediums, colour: Ken Whisson's scratchy abstract paintings on the wall; Alex Seton's marble palm trees on the coffee table; a Ben Quilty painting of a hamburger in one of the halls; the fabulously garish ceramics of Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran on a side table.

No sign, though, of paintings by Gabori – they're in storage, he tells me – although a Perspex box housing three paint-stained brushes that belonged to her is sitting on the coffee table. The brushes are surprisingly small, about the thickness of a big thumb. Looking at Gabori's works, one imagines she used huge house-painting brushes, but that's not the case at all.

According to the court documents, from March 2013 to June 2014 Corrigan purchased 83 paintings by Gabori from Evans, although he emphasises to me that he never dealt with Evans directly, leaving Adam Knight to do business for him.

Corrigan paid a total of \$214,447 for those 83 paintings, an average of about \$2600 a piece, which Beverly Knight says is well below the wholesale price. She told ORIC that the total wholesale price for those 83 paintings should have been about \$1 million at the time of purchase, an average of about \$12,000 a piece. (The Australian and New Zealand Art Sales Digest, which records the results of art auctions, shows that from 2011 to 2014, the time of Brett Evans' offending, prices for Gabori's paintings ranged from about \$4500 to \$36,000.)

It's not unusual for dealers to buy art in bulk in order to negotiate a better price and maximise profits when they on-sell. I ask Corrigan whether this was why he bought so many.

"No," he says, sounding slightly hurt by the proposal. "It's because I wanted to do the book.

"I am not a dealer," he insists. "I'm a collector, and I'm a bit of a nutty collector." I ask if the very low price of the works, relative to Gabori's market price, raised any suspicions in him. "If Adam had started offering me some of these for \$50 or \$75 ... I would have got suspicious and pulled out of the deal," he says. "[But] I paid the normal price."

The book he refers to is a hardback, 222-page tome commissioned at Corrigan's expense and published under the Macmillan imprint in April 2015, two months after Gabori's death. Titled *The Corrigan Collection of Paintings by Sally Gabori*, it cost Corrigan \$150,000 to produce and was launched at a succession of high-profile events across the country, by prominent figures including Rupert Myer, then chair of the Australia Council for the Arts, in Melbourne, and former governor-general Quentin Bryce, in Brisbane.

Beverly Knight was unimpressed when she got hold of *The Corrigan Collection of Paintings by Sally Gabori* a week after its Melbourne launch. Within it, she recognised many of the Gabori paintings she'd set aside not to be sold. That's when she realised something was awry on Mornington Island. Knight was so disturbed by the book that she rang all the public art gallery bookshops in Australia, asking them not to stock it. Only the National Gallery of Victoria agreed. Knight continues to condemn the book and wants any remaining copies pulped. Corrigan finds her reaction difficult to fathom.

"This was a fun thing to do," he says. "Can't some people work out – certainly Beverly can't – there's got to be some fun in this whole art thing? The whole thing is meant to be a happy venture." He proudly shows me the letter from ORIC thanking him for his co-operation in the investigation.



*US comedian Steve Martin, a serious collector of Indigenous art, owns some of the paintings initially sold by Evans.*

I ask Corrigan what he thinks about the quality of the paintings sold by Evans. As proof of their artistic merit, he tells me that some were bought by American comedian Steve Martin, a serious collector of Australian Aboriginal art. Martin is one of the major clients of ambitious Melbourne art dealer D'Lan Davidson, former head of Aboriginal Art at Sotheby's Australia who has been vigorously growing his business in the secondary market for Aboriginal art, forging ties with big international players such as mega-gallery Gagosian. Corrigan sold some of his

Gabori paintings through Davidson's gallery, D'Lan Contemporary, which is where Steve Martin acquired them.

When I ring Davidson to ask, among other things, whether I can speak with Martin about the Gabori paintings, he's incensed that I even have the nerve to ask. Davidson is a keen self-promoter, but this is not the kind of attention he wants.

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**In her 70s**, with silvery bobbed hair and dressed in layers of black, Beverly Knight has a brusque manner and a reputation for being "territorial". After so many years promoting Gabori, and building a relationship with the family, she's protective of her patch.

"It was when this book came out that I knew there was a problem," Beverly Knight tells me as we sit in her third-floor office in Market Street, Melbourne, around the corner from her gallery, with a copy of Corrigan's book on the table. "I was knocked off my feet because a lot of the works in the book were works I had put away," she says.

"I had no evidence up until then what was going on. All I knew was that there were occasional poor works appearing on the market, and people were thinking they were fakes.

"And then getting Sally when she was near death," Knight adds, pointing to the photos of the artist in the book. "Some of the photos are just appalling, really heartbreaking."



*Beverly Knight, the Melbourne gallery director who became Gabori's primary art dealer and art agent of her estate.*

Knight's office glows with the works of Gabori. In the entrance hang some particularly strong examples, such as *Dibirdibi Country*, 2012, sweeps of yellow, orange, magenta and white sparring with each other.

I ask Knight to point out some of the paintings in Corrigan's book that she considers of lower quality. She indicates a couple, and to my eye they don't seem radically different to those she's sold, Gabori's work being in essence raw and spontaneous. Might she have sold such work in the future, though? "Maybe," Knight says. "It wouldn't be up to me, because the estate owns them. I don't own them."

Artists' works are open to reassessment, Knight explains, and part of the process a dealer goes through entails returning to certain works and looking at them afresh.

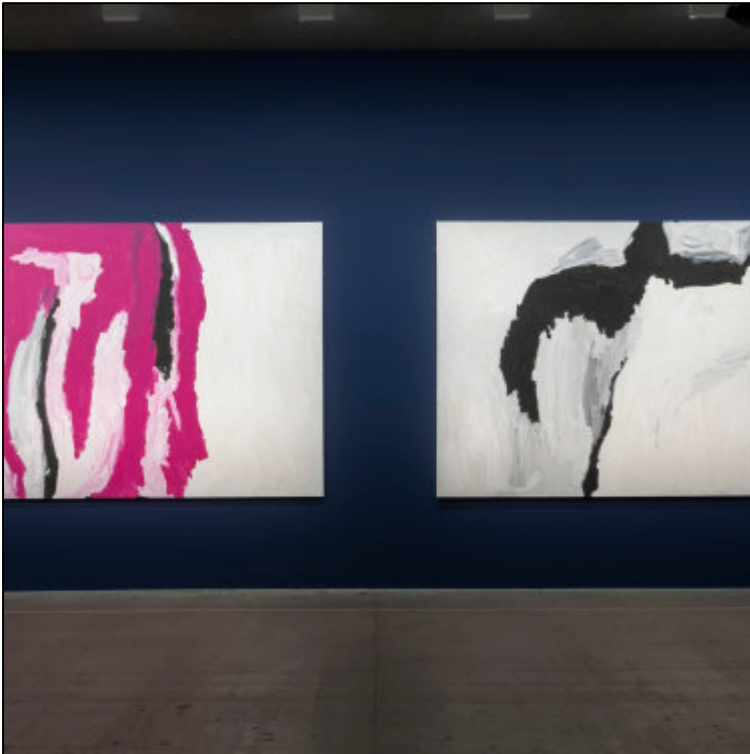
Knight's decision to publicly criticise the paintings in Corrigan's book has created friction in the art trade, foremost between her and the younger dealer snapping at her heels, D'Lan Davidson, a strikingly tall and confident 40-something. Knight asked Davidson not to sell any works from Corrigan's collection while the Brett Evans case was pending. Davidson sought his own advice. "In this exceptional circumstance, we made direct contact with the lead investigative body of the case – ORIC – and we relied on the information that they provided to me personally," Davidson says.

In December 2020, Davidson launched an exhibition of 10 works by Gabori, eight of which were from the Corrigan collection. Prices ranged from \$14,000 for smaller works to \$88,000 for large works, with two works being price on application, including one that Corrigan had bought from Beverly Knight's gallery, and had pictured on the cover of his book. This painting Knight had pointed to as an excellent example of Gabori's work. "I believe in those paintings," Davidson tells me. "We put them up for sale because we did everything right, we did our due diligence, we paid copyright (\$3400) and resale royalty (\$18,053), and we were proven right."

When I ask what he means by "proven right", he says that "the paintings were purchased legally and have clear title".

Knight disagrees. She defines "clear title" as a direct line from the point of sale back to the artist, and since Gabori was not paid for the Evans works, Knight says there is no direct line with them. She tells me she's been contacted by several international collectors concerned about the provenance of their Gabori paintings. One collector asked Davidson for a refund, which he duly provided. As it turned out, this was for a Gabori painting that had nothing to do with the batch that Brett Evans unlawfully sold, highlighting how easily buyer confidence can be undermined when there's a hint of scandal surrounding an artist.





*Gabori's paintings on display at the Fondation Cartier exhibition.*

Knight also asked the auction house Deutscher and Hackett to check in with her on any Gabori paintings from Corrigan that might be coming up for sale while the Brett Evans case was ongoing. It agreed. Navigating the situation was delicate for auction house co-founder Chris Deutscher, who has dealt with Pat Corrigan for 40-odd years. "I think the works are great, there is nothing wrong with them," Deutscher tells me. "When I saw D'Lan's catalogue, I was envious. How come Pat's selling his Gaboris? I didn't think he ever wanted to sell them ... there are some very good examples. Some of them are verging on the spectacular."

Amid this stand-off, Davidson went on the offensive and pitched for Knight's job, offering his services as art agent for the Gabori estate. I ask the Gabori estate's lawyer, Jeneve Frizzo, whether change is likely. She responds via email: "Beverly Knight Art + Business is the Agent for the Estate. The Estate is very grateful to the Agent's ethical and skilled stewardship of the artist's legacy. The estate is not considering changing agency arrangements."

The court case may be over, but the Gabori estate holds the trump card: from now on it can refuse copyright for any of the paintings Brett Evans unlawfully handled, prohibiting them from being illustrated in auction house or dealer catalogues, thereby hampering their sale. "That's the instruction from the estate," Knight tells me. "Copyright is denied for any works listed in the [Evans] court documents."

Whether all this affects the prices for the Evans-sold works if and when their current owners want to trade them remains to be seen, as, too, whether the controversy around them has a dampening effect on Gabori's entire market. As to legal avenues

for the estate to seize the Evans works, it is not known if any exist and, if so, whether they are being pursued. In the meantime, Frizzo writes that the estate “would be grateful to any person in possession of such works who would return them to the estate”.

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**On the other side of the world**, far from the power plays of Australia’s commercial art world, Sally Gabori’s name is writ large on the glass facade of the Fondation Cartier’s spectacular Jean Nouvel-designed building in Montparnasse. Beverly Knight jubilantly texts me photos from Paris: Narelle, Tori and Amanda, standing in front of the massive poster bearing their mother and grandmother’s name; another of Amanda, inside the exhibition, in front of one her mother’s vast “ice-cream” works, painted in luscious pastels.

The Fondation Cartier was established in 1984 by the French luxury goods company to present contemporary art in its broadest sense, including painting, photography, design, performance, video and fashion. Its long-standing director, Hervé Chandès, has exhibited the biggest names in contemporary art, among them Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, Matthew Barney and Australians Ron Mueck and Marc Newson. But nothing prepared him for Sally Gabori. When Chandès was first shown a catalogue of Gabori’s work several years ago, his reaction was visceral.

“I said to myself, immediately, and to everyone around me at the Fondation, ‘Let’s do it!’ ” Chandès tells me by video from Paris. “I was completely overwhelmed ... by the colours, by the composition, the scale, the size, the beauty, the space. Really, it was shocking. Shocking! And so beautiful.”

Gabori’s exhibition, the first of an Australian Indigenous artist at the Fondation, is a milestone as significant as that experienced by another late-flowering artist, the much-lauded Emily Kame Kngwarreye, who was honoured with a comprehensive solo exhibition in Tokyo, Japan, in 2008, also posthumously.

Thirty of Gabori’s paintings are being exhibited across the Fondation’s two floors, as well as three collaborative paintings created with other Kaiadilt artists including her daughters, Amanda and Elsie. The subterranean floor is exclusively for Gabori’s monumental canvases, those measuring two metres by six metres, which Judith Ryan, who also travelled to Paris for the opening, tells me reminds her of stepping into the room of Monet’s *Water Lilies* at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris. Following its four months in Paris, the Gabori exhibition will travel to Italy for the Milan Triennale early next year.

***“She’s not here, but somewhere, we are talking to her. And the show is her show ... it’s not her memories, she’s alive! And it’s for the family, it’s for the community.”***

I ask Chandès whether he thinks many French people will have heard of Sally Gabori. “Except us, no one,” he says flashing a charming smile. “That’s the idea, to introduce her work with a solo exhibition and a fantastic selection of artwork. Our wish is to make something important for Sally Gabori. First, for Sally Gabori herself. We are talking to her. She’s not here, but somewhere, we are talking to her. And the show is her show ... it’s not her memories, she’s alive! And it’s for the family, it’s for the community.”

**Sally Gabori’s Queensland Supreme Court mural** was commissioned more than a decade ago, but Amanda and Dorothy Gabori have never seen it. On a cool June morning, we make our way along Brisbane’s Roma Street to the courts, the fresh breeze skipping around the Gabori sisters’ colourful skirts.

On a curved wall in the public square before the building’s entrance, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama’s *Thousands of Eyes* installation sizes us up. Sally Gabori is in good company. We pass through security, take a lift to the third floor and go searching for the Banco Court, where the mural is housed, only to find the room is locked. A barrister in long, black robes points us to a judge’s associate who might help. Her face lights up when we explain why we’re here. “What an honour it is to meet you, I love that artwork,” she tells the sisters.

She swipes her card against the court door’s lock and in we go. In the hush of the empty court room, I hear Dorothy and Amanda draw breath. “Oh, it’s so beautiful,” they murmur in unison.



*Amanda and Dorothy Gabori in front of their mother’s mural at the Supreme Court in Brisbane.*

The mural’s scale and energy takes us all by surprise – it’s four metres high and 16 metres wide, sweeping across the entire back wall. Vigorous white brush strokes dissolve into the primary colours layered beneath, giving the painting an ethereal sea light.

Artists Jeph Neale and Hilary Jackman were entrusted with transferring Gabori’s artwork to the Banco Court, travelling to Mornington Island in June 2010 to meet the artist, by then in her mid-80s, and learn first-hand her method of paint

application. They have done a superb job; the mural radiates Gabori's spirit. We all struggle to hold back tears.

"Could I go and touch it?" Dorothy asks shyly. She walks quietly towards the wall, past the judges' bench, until she is face-to-face with the painting. She reaches up to the mural and holds her right hand against it. Her long, elegant fingers rest there for a sustained stretch of time. Dorothy stands, silent, hand tenderly pressed against the mural as though summoning her mother's spirit, connecting with her ancestral lands. The moment feels too sacred, too private, to watch. It is a moment of clarity in the complicated story of Sally Gabori.