

there is a place at the heart of 24HR Art



24HR Art is a church not a high church, but a broad church, one in which many voices have found a home. It is a house temple and a well-butressed cathedral made of humble materials – bare concrete and corrugated iron illuminated from within by clear white non-reflective spots strategically placed at critical intervals.

It is an evangelical, proselytising fundamentalist church that bears witness to the radical transformative power of contemporary art, and manifests as all things to all people at all times. It preaches in the active mode – proactive and reactive seeking converts, believers, dissenters and hot gossellers to tell the story of the art of the northern terror-tory. Fellow travellers find shelter inside and out and the porch is always open, even if the roller door is down.

Its mission began at the Go-Lo servo in Fannie Bay and moved to the former Picture palace at Parap. Disciples came from far and wide in the territory. Many were called and all chosen, the first among them the artists, then came teachers and students from the university and museum curators. Some were painters, some were sculptors, some installed, some deconstructed, some made pots, some videoed, others sounded, many multi mediated, some performed, others wrote, some were very young, some old and wise, some were newcomers, some old hands and from them a Board was wrought and a Committee to deliberate the order of service and more and more members were gathered into the flock from nearby suburbs and far flung communities.

At the heart of 24HR Art is Mystery, the mystery of paradox, in which deep contradictions are reconciled. It is absolutely local but never parochial, national in its internationality, speaking with the voice of one place in a conversation about many places. Discerning but not discriminatory. Excellence and Accessibility walk hand in hand. All proposals considered. Entrepreneurial but aware that art is more than a business, promoting, showing and sometimes selling, finding the audience is the real deal. It is a site of transubstantiation and an easy place for a stranger to enter.

Like a good church it welcomes and embraces people, it seeks them out and gives them the sense of discovering it for themselves, there are many rooms in its mansion and a place laid at the table for all. It includes people and joins them together. It crosses boundaries, rivers, deserts and even the Berrimah line. Its beliefs are strong and made manifest but there is no dogma and ideas swell, grow and expand to ripeness and fruit, it has a mission that is never entirely reduced to a statement.

Dialogues are constantly promulgated, dissent is orthodoxy and a thousand flowers bloom. Schisms are forestalled, divisions sundered and wounds cleaned and left to heal in the open air. None are cast out or excommunicated and much bull tolerated. Provocation is an art form itself and given to the ex cathedra in camera utterance. At times the flock may have wondered wijay na, but they have not lost their way. New mudmaps manifest overnight and the way is made clear, ever forward, ever new, the horizon beckons the post jurassic boundary riders in the state of the art. True believers know new territories are staked out by ideas and schemes, exhibitions and events, not railway tracks.

The past is not forgotten, but recalled and revalued. Ancestors and antecedents are honoured, those organisations and institutions that went before and kept the fiery flame of modern art flickering in the far north are remembered. Debts and dues are paid, past deeds recorded. No martyrs have been burnt but it does get awful hot sometimes and once some eager zealots almost set alight half their brethren hidden beneath a hessian dragon, but the burnt ones lived to tell the tale and watch the conflagration on video.

The book of revelations is the community and the land around it. Visiting artists from all parts of the country and the rest of the world are taken out to have the community and the land introduced, glossed and explained to them by people who love the place, so that the strangers return in time to catch their flight back having had The Top End revealed to them, and speaking of the revelation it was, for verily what they said was true, the country is amazing.

The continual reinvention of the living word is the Members' Show where the brothers and sisters renew their faith by the act of making offerings and bringing them along to the temple by the due date. And so the people have brought Dogs, graven self-images, Snakes and Serpents, Cars, Crocs, Tourists Told where to go, Road Trains and small white canvas squares but not all at the same time. And these things were all much decorated and of splendid colours and multitudinous forms, and by a miracle they all fitted on the walls and the floor and the roof and by an even greater miracle no one was left out of the catalogue and the people came and saw that they were wonderful, marvellous and they gave thanks to themselves and the membership of the living church renewed itself for another year.

At the Openings, water is made into wine or champagne, fit for all to drink responsibly and the people consume wondrous food made in the shapes of things of this world, and more particularly the things in this show, making bread the body of art. Performances, songs and dances are created to celebrate the liturgy and speeches declaimed from the stairs. The people spill out into the lane, children play in the fountain and the party like the humidity goes on forever until the congregation collects the empties and washes the glasses before they go home.

Casual worship takes place as an eucharistic event every Saturday morning and coexists with the market place, people shop and eat and look at art, entering with their arms full children, mangoes and coconuts, heliconias, orchids and ginger flowers, fruit lassies, pawpaw salads and satays depositing produce and progeny like a harvest festival at the table where the morning's lay preacher sits and marks them off the book that is kept there in which all names and visitations are written.

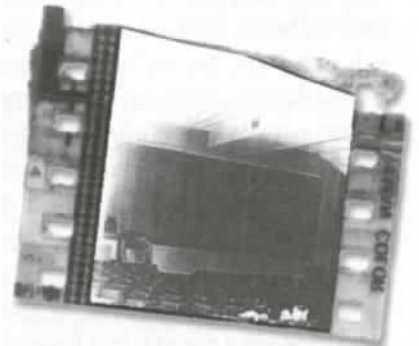
In the miracle of loaves and fishes is writ The Fan Club. A man of stone, with a stone heart was sweating, the little glittering rose flag on his collar was glistening. He said the place was too hot and it was, all agreed with him this time. He said whatever tribute you can gather I will multiply it somefold and you will have air con just like all my other temples made of marble and granite. But the people said we don't want air con it's not sustainable and besides who will pay the power bill, so the wise men from the Reform Church of Living Real Life in Tropical Places, were consulted and their demands ventilated. Then the Leopard Skin Madonna rallied her vestal virgins and their paramours and they gave up their gold and silver, their cheques and their plastics to make the fans whirr blade by blade and by degrees the hottest gallery in the world became a little cooler.

And from the meeting house the news has gone forth of grants and prizes, residencies and collaborations, sending artists into the schools, shopping plazas, merchant's windows, parklands, beachfronts, prisons and all manner of willing precincts. The word about moral rights, legal rights, copyrights and tax breaks has been given out by visiting preachers and project officers from a host of acronyms in forums, meetings and one on one interfaces and consultations. Slides are made, copied and catalogued and sent out with reams and reams of applications, reports and acquittals, auspiced unto the end of time and the photocopier has gone on and on into the night.

And the congregation recalls its charismatic leaders and often gathers to tell tales of legendary deeds and splendid visions.

The first, an experienced Emissary wore black from head to foot, in defiance of the heat. Shod in Blundstones, he came down among us, a man from the south, who told the people they were part of a great chain of contemporary art spaces that girdled the continent but that they were unique and deserving of their own place and the money would be found, one the submission was written, to build upon the lube pit, and it was.

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Then came a Goddess lately from Sydney but born in Rockhampton who already understood the tropics, and the internal workings of the Vatican which was a great asset and much prized. The Goddess was assisted in her ministry by a godette stolen from Treasury who balanced the books while suspending a big block of concrete from the floor and discoursed post modern constructively. The Rocky Goddess in the elegant sandals keenly preached the need to include our Asian neighbours and to develop friendly relations and art exchanges along the latitudes and over the seas. She taught the wisdom of the long stopover, break your journey and while you're here, you could run a workshop, give a lecture, show some slides and we'll take you out to Kakadu besides.

Then like an apparition, from Seven Spirit Bay the Leopardskin Madonna made her appearance towering on her platforms in orange toenail polish and brought the people in and they had such a good time they kept on coming and anything she asked of them they gave willingly. And then it came to pass that a flying fox with a crocodile smile that flashed his long grey beard arrived and he was splendidly arrayed in vestments of many colours and numerous messages, which among other things, but most memorably, said, Fuck Art Let's Dance. He came from Yirkala with a mission to bring Aboriginal artists into the fold and he joined up the Art centres and they sent in barks and acrylics and wonderful, crazed weavings. He took art inside out and they who were far from their land showed what they knew of their land and the people came and bought the work before it was even hung.

Then Sister J came in to town from down the track in her Buddy Holly glasses and brought the Batchelor girls and their mates along and she teamed up with the Our Lady of the Desert and they went on line in real time and a virtual transformation occurred and we watched this space and could see it all happening now. And of late St Catherine's wheel has turned again to the place which was her beginning. She has been into the desert and beyond the never never and come back to the red sunset and the melting 24 hour watch, to find it is the same but different, and still recognisable.

Ten years on, at the centre is the art, which is, was and shall forever be the heart.

VIVA GLORIA 24HR ART!

suzanne spinner

selections from the GOSPELS:

"Darwin is really a perfect post-modern situation, the perfect post modern construct."

Chris Downie
Eyeline 1990

"One result of this stasis, this conflation of real difference with "difference" is that art from any region is left in no-place, between the hegemony of centrist dogma, and its mirror image, the rhetoric of Regionalism."

Sarah Follent
Outlying and Far-reaching 1991

"Given our location on the Northern edge of Australia, it is a logical place from which...to develop an awareness and appreciation of contemporary visual art of SE Asia"

Judy Kean
Cocoons Kerosene Culture 1992-4

"The NT is a centre for traditional Aboriginal art but out there in the suburban sprawls of larger cities and towns, a new art is born that makes reference to another agenda...yet their work has rarely been seen in Darwin."

Thelma John
"Real Aborigines who paint real Aboriginal art are dubbed 'tribal' and the impostors, those fake blackfellas who make gammon art are only 'urban' Aboriginal artists."

Gary Lee
"There was a point when I thought this show might have been tagged 'urban art'. That word gives me the shits more than even some of the art speak language, used to describe other Contemporary Art."

Steve Fox
Bilawara 1993

"We now work in this place that is divergent and felt it imperative as artists, to establish dialogues between the far north, often defined as peripheral, and the metropolis from which we came."

Mark Elliot-Rankin/Cath Bowdler
Never Never 1994

"Darwin is a bit like a roadside stop conveniently located along the latest art highway"

Liz O'Shea
Periphery 1994

"These artists on the periphery are consumed by land like a chip on the shoulder... Biennales in distant cities represent what we, the inhabitants here like to think we have escaped from."

Thelma John
Real Time 1994

"The Wet brings the long-grassers inside, not right inside usually but under cover... They are part of our audience after all. Through their window they are able to view some of the most stimulating shows held in Darwin."

Steve Fox
Real Time 1995

"Even for non-indigenous artists, what is exotically marginal to mainstream contemporary Australian art, is central to artists who live and work in the Territory."

Dawn Mendham
Contemporary Territory 1996

"Darwin's physical and cultural history and extraordinary racial mix, make it unique and precarious as the rate of change and development escalates... A refusal to engage with the extraordinary richness and diversity of this place will result in a loss of identity, supplanted by sameness, a mediocrity and a blandness that is at odds with this place and its people."

Cath Bowdler
Veneer 1998

"... In the new paradigm, Darwin was suddenly important, not an isolated outpost..."

Ian McLean
Art and Place 1999

"There is a huge transient population of artists who come to the Territory, stay for a while and move on. So much so that often the act of 'emerging' here is synonymous with leaving and moving on. For some of the artists in ripe that will happen, others however will stay forever."

Cath Bowdler/ Geraldine Tyson
ripe 1999