

100% tracy
24 HR Art, Darwin

"Cyclones have a sound—the sound of hundreds of sheets of iron flying in the wind." "We could hear iron ripping or tearing off, whether it was our iron or somebody else's we didn't know..." "There is a particular screeching noise made when corrugated iron sheets rub against each other or are pulled off their holding nails..."

comments by survivors of Cyclone Tracy

100% TRACY, an exhibition commemorating Cyclone Tracy opened in Darwin at 24 HR ART, last December, twenty years after the cyclone. The intention of 100% TRACY was to reflect on the cyclone experience via its generic material—corrugated iron.

All of the twelve participating artists work either with recycled materials which

culture, or with its contemporary form, corrugated custom or mini orbe zinc alume. Six of the artists were from the Northern Territory and they all made new work directly addressing the cyclone, whereas the interstate contingent was invited on the basis of the artists' continuing exploration of the material. Only two, Ted Jonsson and Chris Mulhearn invoked Tracy directly.

Rosalie Gascoigne was the only artist who exhibited a work as old as the memories of Tracy. Gascoigne's *Pink Window* (1975) reads now as an elegy for the cyclone, a moment in the wind caught and stilled forever. The ambiguity of the gathered and rumped sheet of iron against the window frame, looks like a torn ruffle-pleated fabric curtain and also like a sheet of iron that has blown against this frame from somewhere else. This work was the inspiration for the exhibition and, in the way that it spoke so eloquently of things it could not know, stood as the show's leitmotif.

All the artists trod a fine line between commemoration and celebration of a tragedy still horrifically fresh in the memories of those who went through the cyclone. Twenty years later, Tracy has become a commodity, an event in the sparse tourist calendar of the Northern Territory; the hook for a major tourist push: 'Come back and see what it looks like now...'. As curator Steve Fox says, "you ask all kinds of questions about the value of an exhibition tenuously connected to such a tragic event."

Fox's and co-curator Thelma John's response was to position the exhibition in a context of information and reflection, to provoke serious inquiry in the audience as well as pleasure at the display of wit, technique and ironic commentary, ensuring the commemoration was neither earnest nor sentimental. It celebrated diversity, resourcefulness and the power of picking up the pieces and, literally, making the world afresh from what had been discarded. To achieve this, both imaginative response and historical document were conscripted in a variety of art forms. The catalogue included extracts of survivors' accounts culled by historian, Barbara James and a selection of Barry Ledwidge's exceptional photographs taken in the days immediately after the cyclone which grimly evoke the ordinariness of tragedy—devoid of heroics.

The curators commissioned essays by local writers Gary Lee and myself. Lee, a Larrakia man who is an anthropologist/visual artist and playwright wrote the Aboriginal story of the cyclone and dealt head on with the accusation that the cyclone was caused by the displeasure of the Rainbow Serpent at the Larrakia's neglect of their ceremonial duties, while I, a relative newcomer decided I couldn't write about the cyclone and instead focused on the place of corrugated iron in my own history. I found myself writing about my fears as a child—snakes, and my fears as a mother—cyclones. Read together these essays create an intriguing dovetailing of imagery and speech across culture and place.

Local audiophile, Mac Cocker made a soundscape, *Technotrace*, an impression of the progress of Tracy over the corrugated iron roof of 24 HR ART (formerly the Parap Cinema). The surrogate cyclone had an eye, sheets of flying scraping iron and a lone barking dog. To be in the gallery with the tape playing and a storm raging outside was disorienting and eerie. Ledwidge's photographs and Cocker's reconstructed recording were subliminal reminders of what we were commemorating.

But one had to go outside the gallery into the carpark adjoining the shops and the Parap markets to experience the gulf between the real cyclone and the reconstructed memories in Judith Christian Miller's installation, *The Parap Wall Of Memory And Forgetting*, which literally stopped passers by in their tracks. The wall of curving corrugated iron cut a swathe between the trees, and was so high one had to go around it or peer through the window boxes of corrugated perspex (suntus) in which were trapped as if in amber, pale, fragile images of loss—old photographs, locks of hair, stretched skin—in order to regain a perspective on one's place now, in contemporary, rebuilt, redeveloped and reconstructed Darwin.

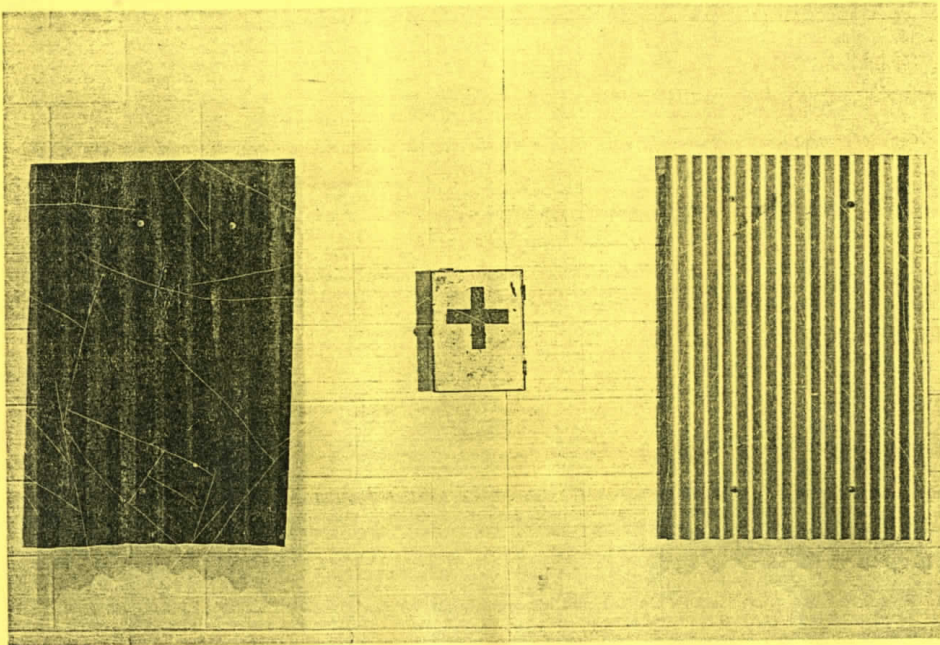
Inside the gallery, the mix was eclectic. Dan Murphy's interactive chook machine, *And The Chooks Blew All Over The Road* or *I Was Expecting A New Bike For Christmas* and Ted Jonsson's sleigh *Santa Never Made It Into Darwin* entranced the audience with whimsy and ingenuity in their busy, but beautifully detailed, pop assemblages.

For me, the strongest pieces were those that showed the innate qualities of the material and so created a necessary connection between the corrugated iron and what it addressed. I especially liked Gascoigne's three pieces because in them one could see the forceful work of the elements—sun, wind and rain on the iron—and Ingo Kleinert's *Sheep By Night*, a simple rectangle of corrugated iron from an old shearing shed which bore the marks of countless sheep rubbing against it, their lanolin 'French polishing' the iron to pewter.

Sky Raabe's *Then. Then. Now.*, a square of old iron, battered and bruised by wear, and placed alongside a square of new unmarked iron with, between the two, a battered metal first aid cabinet, was a minimalist narrative triptych; a modernist memorial. Peter Quinn also combined recycled and new materials but he refurbished the recycled to make a seamless modern surface. His *Cyclone Settle*, a big couch made of a curved slab of new mini orbe set on legs made from the spiralling iron springs of a 1974 Holden Kingswood had an inbuilt "cyclonic wobble"; gently rocking in response to the weight of those who settled (on) it. Ironically lounging between domestic furniture and public art, it had an historical resonance and elegantly combined utility with play.

Many of the other participating artists strained to contain and control the materials and the plethora of ideas with which they were working, producing an uncomfortable fracturing of form and content, (you wished they had confined either in order to resolve more). The results were often forced constructions in which no one element was imperative. Nonetheless 100% TRACY engaged a wide audience with the breadth and depth of the work shown and the curatorial panache which brought into play such diverse and disparate responses to the brief.

suzanne spinner



Skye Raabe, *Then. Then. Now.*, 1994. Courtesy 24 HR ART, Darwin.



Kim Mahood, *On the Line* (detail), 1994.
Courtesy 24 HR ART, Darwin.