

THE RE- WARD IN JELLYFISH TOWN: THE NATSIAA TWENTYFIVE YEARS ON -----

I have been going to National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, the NATSIAAs or the *Tell-est-rah Re-wards* as it was poetically pronounced by one of the Indigenous speakers at the opening, for twenty two of the last twenty five years. Every year someone asks me, are they better or worse than last year and I can never answer because it is the wrong question. They are always different and always the same, and to make matters clearer this year even more so. There are always some marvellous new things that appear like great shafts of light just as there are always some works that should have stayed in a dark corner. Twenty five years on the Telstra is an institution within the Indigenous art infrastructure in Darwin (and nationally) but is also a living core around which a lot spins and depends for its spin.

There is now The Big Saturday that follows on from the NATSIAA announcement on Friday night, when a dozen or so related exhibition open around town at all the main local galleries, Framed, Karen Brown, Raft, 24 HR Art, the Maningrida Shop as well as the return of some specially set up visiting galleries; including Papunya Tula and Tiwi Arts who camped this year at Browns Mart. This art time saw the addition of a new and exciting player, with the recent opening of Outstation in what is now becoming the Parap Art precinct, where it joins 24 HR Art, Raft, Nomad Art and Tiwi Art Network. Outstation is the bold venture of Matt Ward formerly manager of the Maningrida gallery and Ben Danks ex Papunya Tula and their brief is to represent the remote area art centres (excluding those they formerly worked for). They were perfectly positioned to show *From Wirrimanu*, emerging artists from Warlayirti Artists at Balgo, an important exhibition of artists who were not in the NATSIAA . There is also always a double opening of new print works at Northern Editions; a showing of the latest Garma print project; the Yirrkala Galuku Palm tree gallery in the Botanical Gardens as well as a show at Nomad Art itself, now gloriously relocated within the precinct at the former Raft11, where they presented *Custodians*, a print series from a group of senior artists.

Last year another large spoke was added to the wheel that is the NATSIAA, the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair. Instigated by Appolline Kohen of Maningrida Art Centre it continues to grow, topping twenty remote art centres and now running over three days so it has become bigger, brighter and longer with a diverse range of quality work, available as they say, at every price point. The synergy of these events is enormous and a tribute to the galvanising effect the NATSIAA has on the development of this considerable infra and super structure in the sector. You can compare and contrast individual works in the NATSIAA not simply with each other but very often with other works from the same community or even by the same artists in very differently curated situations; it provides an unparalleled opportunity to develop and hone your eye for the work that interests you.

Overall Winner and General Painting

Papunya Tula women took out the overall winner and best work in the category of General Painting. The consensus was that Makiniti Napanangka was overdue for a big win but this painting of thick stripey ridges of pastel sunset colours that represents the strands of handspun hairstring was not among her strongest and most powerful, while Doreen Reid Nakamarra's work was a finely wrought depiction of designs relating to a rockhole, Marrapinti and the nose bones made by women when they visited the site.

A better opportunity to put Makinti's work in a context was in Dallas Gold's recent Raft Show, *Paint* featuring Makinti alongside her painting peers, Indigenous and non- Indigenous; Balgo artist, Eubena Nampitjin and Sydney artists Ildico Kovacs and Aida Tomescu to create an extraordinary cross cultural dialogue in impassioned impasto.

In the General Painting category Angelina George, Wakartu Cory Surprise and Richard Bell were Highly Commended. Ngukurr artist, Angelina George won the General Painting Award last year and this year she has a stunning solo show at Karen Brown Gallery of her many faceted and highly coloured dramatic landscapes of the Ruined City. Her work, *Far Away Places* was a weaker example than the series but it was sympathetically positioned beside a large landscape by Billy Benn Perrurle from Alice Springs, and the paintings lent luminosity to each other. Benn's work, which began on a very small scale and was like a detail from Hermannsberg watercolour but more loosely painted has grown in size and stature and become even more emotionally expressive. Gloria Pannka's West MacDonnell Ranges was also Highly Commended in the Works on Paper category and it is also in the new freer approach to Western Arrernte landscape begun by Billy Benn. Fitzroy Crossing artist Wakutu Cory Surprise's recent work has moved away from the parallel depressions of the red and yellow sandhills to a focus on the circular forms of rockholes in brilliant indigo blues and vibrant greens and *Wayampararti* was a fine example of her cooler palette.

Amongst a number of political works Richard Bell's tribute to Roy Lichenstein, *from the Psalm Island Singing Suite* packed a punch between the eyes, the words in speech balloon and the clever title said the rest. Koori artist Turbo Brown, a Latji Latji man whose speciality is a repertoire of characterful animals and birds entered, *Sunset Bunjil Bunjil* depicting a great eagle silhouetted in a red setting sun. It was a big bold work that didn't quite come off at that scale, compared to his 2005 entry, *Pelicans up on the Murray River in Stormy Weather*, a smaller work depicting the quietly gliding birds sublime and smug as only pelicans can be; it was a fully resolved work and could easily have won the general painting award that year. Joan Stokes' *Outback Angels* a magical realism double portrait celebrating Aboriginal mothers and children set in dusty hazy desert landscape was quirky and captivating. In contrast to the high ceremonial seriousness and austerity of the Pintubi painters, Brown and Stokes are painters of the intimate, the closely watched and well-observed ordinary miracles of life.

Bark Painting

Terry Ngamandra Wilson from Maningrida won the Bark Painting Award with his *Gulach, Spike Rush* a powerfully kinetic pattern of triangle motifs emblematic of the spike rush. Another contender for the bark award could have been the Milingimbi bark by George Dangi, *Wagilag Story (mowik ceremony)*; a fresh take on a tradition that's been dormant for some time, with the figures set in an open dark ground as if arrayed on the bare earth of the ceremonial ground. Yirrkala barks have dominated the bark painting category for over a decade however this year it is their exhibition at Framed Gallery, *Yarrpany Honey: Art from the Marrakulu Clan* that presents an infinitely more satisfying gathering of new work of some fifty barks and *Larrakitj*, hollow logs from the Wanambi family. The exhibition featured great works from Wukan Wanambi, a previous NATSIAA winner, and exciting new small works from Yilpirr Wanambia a young artist whose fluttery white ochre horizontals like dry leaves or water rippling in sun light had such delicate quivering life to them.

Wandjuk Marika 3D Memorial

The Wandjuk Marika Memorial Award is for a three dimensional work and this years winner, *Incident at Mutpi*(1975) by Nyapanyapa Yunupingu was a charming naive style bark on not simply a secular subject: prominent Yirrkala artist, Marrnyula Munungurr has been doing from time to time since her AIDS story and truck barks; but rather, a personal story. Its innovation and spirited quality was such that it could easily have been allowed to stand on its own considerable merits in the bark painting category. Instead it went under a special plea as a three dimensional work because it was accompanied by an engaging documentary film about the story of the painter being charged by a buffalo, badly gored and narrowly escaping death which was made by the new multimedia studio, The Mulka Project. In 2003 the late Paddy Fordham's painting was accompanied by a recording of him singing the story and it was not considered a Wandjuk Marika entrant.

There were a number of other innovative works in three dimensions among those that were commended by the judges. Dinnie Kunoth Kemarre's brightly painted carved cowboy riding a very fat piggy looking Hereford in *Harts Range Rodeo*. Kemarre is one of the family of artists who have been making lively painted carvings of local and AFL footballers in action. Another innovative carver is Kimberley artist, Pampila Yankarr whose painted torsos in ceremonial headwear re-ignite the carving tradition of John Dodo deserved commendation, as did Debra Wurrkidji from Maningrida whose Lorrkon, hollow log was elegant and finely executed .

Shirley Purdies work *Ngalangangpum Mother and Child* was a very homely Madonna carved in wood and painted in the soft chalky Kimberley ochres, it recalled George Mung Mung's exquisitely moving Madonna carving and affirmed the persistence of Kija and Christian beliefs at Warmun. It was highly commended, had it won it would have capped off a year of many wins for religious art by Purdie who won the Blake Prize last year for *Stations of the Cross*. At various times, this category inspires new ways of presenting work, however Roy Wiggan's thread cross, Ilma this year was static and lonely, a pale shadow of the superb installation he entered in 2004, *Sandbar and Hair belt*, a series of ilmas which came alive and evoked the movement of the dance they might have been made for.

A work that could have won this category had it been entered was Margaret Gamuti's cast aluminium basket, the paradox of a squat solid object radiating permanence and monumentality yet based on the ephemeral lightness of pandanus weaving. Her work was on show at 24HR Art in *Gatherings* the result of a collaboration between Millingimbi Art Centre and Urban Art Projects in Brisbane; the same group who realised Dennis Nona's winning bronze crocodile last year.

Works on Paper

Dennis Nona is primarily known as a printmaker however last year he won the overall award with his big bronze crocodile, based on a story he had previously realised as a print. This year he returned to his metier and won the Works on Paper category; his work continues to surprise and enchant with its virtuosity and technical innovation matched by dense content and significant meaning. His intaglio etching *Dugam* was no exception. Nona's work is usually so highly detailed in all over patterning that his withered yam floating airily beneath the moonlit sky was a surprising understatement and recalled the tradition of European botanical art.

The suite of small paintings on paper by Ngarra, an old man from the Kimberley but a recently emerged artist working with Indigenart, Mossenson Galleries, with their bold shapes and scattered dots recalled the Turkey Creek style but gave it a fresh run. Ngarra's works have the flatness and softness of felt cutouts arranged on a picture board to tell a story. They were not highly commended but could easily have been.

Generally this was not a strongly contested category and some of the best works on paper were not in the NATSIAA but in the concurrent exhibitions. The Galuku Palm tree Gallery showed the latest prints from Buku Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala based on drawings collected in 1947 by the anthropologists, Ronald and Catherine Berndt. The prints translated superbly the gentle coloured pencil drawings onto soft ground etching plates and among them were many winning works. At Northern Editions at Charles Darwin University were two exhibitions from art centres in the Kimberley, Waringarri in Kununurra and Jirrawun Art in Wyndham. *The Waringarri Suite* was a collection of etching by thirteen Mirriwoong artists including Peggy and Alan Griffiths, Migonette Jamin and Minnie Lumai. Northern Editions is celebrating its fifteen anniversary and the Griffiths were part of one of the early print workshops alongside Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie. A painting in the NATSIAA, *Warmun Dreamtime* by Gabriel Nodea, a young artist from Warmun paid homage to the continuing influence of Rover Thomas and the Gurrir Gurrir in the community.

Jirrawun Editions was a showing of large scale etchings made between 2005-8 by important Kimberley artists, the late P.B., Rammy Ramsay, Freddie Timms, Phyllis Thomas and Rusty Peters, all peers of Rover Thomas. Jirrawun artists are invariably conspicuously absent from the NATSIAA and equally likely to be very present somewhere close by. They are still regrouping after the departure of their *deus ex machina* Tony Oliver and after the death of their greatest painter. This year they were at Northern Editions and in *Jirrawun Colour* at Raft Artspace. Rammy Ramsay has come out as a spectacular master of colour, his bold turquoise and yellow works were at Raft, while his etchings at Northern Editions included a suite of five red squares that were gestural and attenuated in their abstraction and close to Rothko in their effect, while Rusty Peters in *Barra Country upstream from Warloo* was painterly and delicate and Phyllis Thomas' big bulbous *Jumuluny-Boab* were the standout individual works.

This year there was no Larrakia presence in the NATSIAA although the Larrakia Dancers performed at the opening painted up to look like a tribute to the old man, Mitbul Prince of Wales, himself a famous dancer who had based his paintings on bodymarks. However down at the wharf in the new convention centre at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, the Larrakia Nation Corporation had a booth and a stock of interesting new prints including my personal favourite, *Jelly Fish Dreaming*, by Peter Garamanak Browne and they were advertising *Raw Printing Power* opening the week after the NATSIAA. Meanwhile at 24 HR Art Larrakia artist Gary Lee had a solo show. *Maast Maast* a hymn to Aboriginal male beauty. Lee's work was in last year's NATSIAA and Palawa artist, Julie Gough has been both an entrant and a judge of the NATSIAA but this year her work, a mixed media piece, *Aftermath* was at 24HR Art. Both Gough and Lee's work was not well served by the spaces they were placed in; Lee's photographs needed intimacy and intensity which was dissipated in the large space, while Gough's complex of objects and ideas shown in the small space was cramped and too busy, making it difficult to make the connections she intended from its inherently discriminating concatenation of things.

Finally because you can't really avoid the politics...a highlight of the Aboriginal Art Fair was seeing the new far out Desert communities, the Western Desert Art Mob with their raw rough exciting beginnings of a new movement, and if there hadn't been an Art Fair as well as the NATSIAA that very important point could not have been made. They could not have withdrawn and been seen at the same time ...

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is a Melbourne writer who lived in Darwin for a decade and keeps returning every year at art time.

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