

Darwin art-time

Suzanne Spinner

Darwin Festival

The new format Darwin Festival has settled into wide public acceptance with rare mumblings about the lack of a grand parade and the loss of the floats—instead the Botanic Gardens festival precinct has established itself as a fully realized concept, a proper festive hub. With winking paper lanterns strung in the large spreading trees and bright fairy lights everywhere, the atmosphere is a Kandyan Perhera, only lacking the elephants. The Star Shell is the scene for nightly performances beginning as the sun sets over nearby Mindil beach and going through till midnight—Indigenous dance and music is the mainstay with concerts and music theatre. The Shell is ringed by foodstalls and bars and the catering has gone up a notch with local icons the Roma Bar serving espresso coffees and Hanuman, the renowned Thai Nonya restaurant, serving a street smart version of their fare with even Jimmy Shu behind the very stylish hotpots. The Galku (or palm tree gallery) direct from the Garma festival in North Eastern Arnhemland segues directly into the Darwin one presenting framed prints from the Buku Langapuy Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala. The gallery is firmly ensconced—each tree skirted with white ochre and individually spotlighted. Even after the prints come down each night the trees form a ghostly glade of dancing dervishes.

Solos

This year the festival program was strong in Indigenous work both in dance, including local Larrakia dancer-choreographer Gary Lang's first large scale piece, *Entrapment*, and in a number of solo autobiographical performances—David Page's *Page 8*, George Rrurrambu's *Nerrpu*, Christine Anu's *Intimate and Deadly*, comedian Sean Choolburra's show and the premiere of Tommy Lewis' story on film, *Yella Fella*. Of the shows I was able to

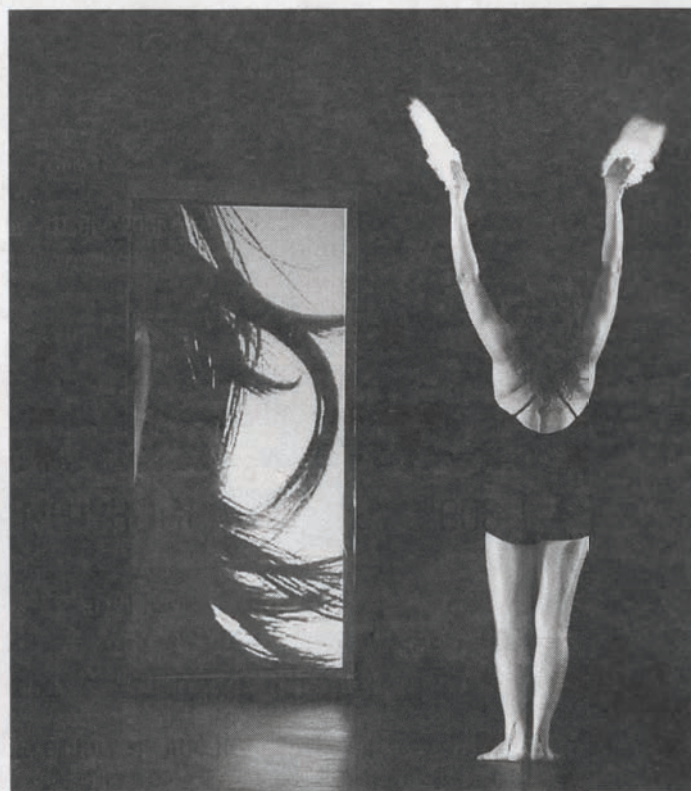
see, *Nerrpu* was by far the most powerful and interesting. George Rrurrambu is a legend, an extraordinarily talented and grounded performer—imagine the danger of Gulpilil crossed with the captivating appeal of Ernie Dingo and throw in some Chuck Berry to mix it up. He sings, he plays guitar and didge, he dances and he's a mean actor telling his story. Although the show had been polished since its first version in 2003, it lost focus in the second half and could still benefit from further dramaturgy—the material is there and the performer can bring it all alive. His story is amazing, living in the desert and missing the saltwater life of Elcho Island where he grew up on the Methodist Mission. George is the subject of Neil Murray's anthem *My Island Home* written in Papunya where Murray and Rrurrambu formed the Warumpi Band in 1981, and I could have done with more of his story.

Cultural exchange

Cultural exchanges from the region also featured in the festival with a large contingent from Indonesia, including a group of dancers and musicians from Makassar, Takbing Siwaliya, who collaborated with the Gupapuyngu Dancers to present an abbreviated version of *Trepang*, retelling the first meetings on the shores of North-Eastern Arnhemland between Makassar and the Yolgnu to trade trepang (sea slug). Meanwhile *Trepang* director Andriah Saint Claire was busy rehearsing a bold new play *DibunuaWaktu* (Time is a Hunter) by Sandra Thibodeaux and Mas Ruscitadewi which explores the contemporary exchange between tourists and locals in Bali and is set in the Sari Club on the night of the bombing.

Angels of Gravity

The Tracks Dance production, *Angels of Gravity*, saw the company invited in from the warmth of their customary outdoor festival performance to the mainstage at Darwin Entertainment Centre. But typically lateral, they took the audience on a journey outside first. While waiting to get in, we watched winged abseilers make their balletic way down the nearby high rise Holiday Inn; then we saw things backstage only to have the curtain part and realize we were on stage looking at an empty theatre and, finally, we took our seats and looked back at where we'd been. The show was a quasi swansong—complete with feathers—for dancer David McMicken who once memorably created the role of a beautiful angel many moons ago when we were all young and lithe. *Angels of Gravity* is about many things, including the dancer's body and what it can and cannot do as age and gravity bring it down to earth. Tracks' work is notable for its fearless pursuit in eclectically assembling the different cultures, values, ages, talents, let alone movement conventions and capacities of its performers and always manages to pull off a deeply moving and aesthetic unity. Nonetheless, amongst local professional dancers, The Grey Panthers, NT Fire and Rescue Squad, ballet school kids and the Lajamanu Yawalyu women dancers, Melbourne dancer Trevor Patrick stole the show.



Tracks, Michele Dott, film dancer Liam Birch

Rodney Laredo

Aboriginal Art Award

The twenty second NATSIAA Aboriginal Art award was marked by the retirement of its founding curator, Margie West who began it with the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1984. Now it is the pre-eminent national and international event celebrating Indigenous art and attracts curators, collectors and dealers, artists and art centre managers from every remote community throughout the NT and the Kimberley, as well as loyal local art lovers and newcomers to Darwin who have heard of its big night party on the museum lawns. And every one of them has a view on how it is run—from how the work is selected from the vast number of entries to how the entries are then judged by a panel of two. Over the years the criteria for the choice of judges has settled on one man, one woman, one Indigenous, one non-Indigenous, one practising artist, one curator. With these attributes distributed amongst only two individuals it can be a big ask. This year the onerous task fell to Victorian artist Destiny Deacon and Queensland Art Gallery Director, Doug Hall. Last year it was Palawa artist Julie Gough and Edmund Capon from the Art Gallery of NSW—all good choices on the face of it but lacking one ingredient. None of these has experience or knowledge in classical Aboriginal art (both an oxymoron and a meaningful term in the context.)

In North-Eastern Arnhemland large painted poles, or Lorrkon, have recently reemerged as a trend, sliding apparently unremarked into the Category of 3D works when it is more than arguable that they are bark paintings in the round. So last year Galumbu Yunupingu's startling installation of 3 poles won the major prize, which was fitting and appropriate. But this year the Wandjuk Marika Memorial 3D Award was won by another pole, remarkably similar, by Naminapu Maymuru-White. Other work in that category was more exciting and culturally significant such as the wall piece of exquisite, finely carved and ochred pearl shells, *Riji*, by Aubrey Tigan from the Kimberley.

The judges' task is patently to reward the best, however there has been an unacknowledged but obvious subtext to reward both innovation within tradition and to laud revivals of

traditional art practices. But that relies on a depth of knowledge to recognise them in the first place. Against a very shallow field of bark paintings, the winning work by accomplished Yirrkala artist Bando Marika stood out and signalled a new direction for her. The winner in the works on paper was a weak choice compared to the depth and technical complexity of Denis Nona's linocut, *Sesserae*, and the winning work for General Painting, *Yam Dreaming* by Evelyn Pultara, was easily trumped by a dozen finer, stronger paintings. The overall prize winner, the grass car dubbed a Toyota, was also controversial, raising arguments over craft versus art; but it was a show stopper and the prize money could not have gone to 17 more deserving women.

Dissatisfaction with the judging process was high this year and there was a lot of muttering for reform. Some are calling for the judges to be drawn from the many long standing collectors of Indigenous art who, it is argued, have always been ready to seek out and invest in excellence; this camp is also arguing for the award to be based in Canberra or Sydney and taken out of local hands. There is also a widespread feeling that the pre-selection process, which culls 150 entries from near to 500, is intrinsically flawed because it relies entirely on slides submitted rather than visceral contact with the work. There is also a growing argument that the number of entries warrants a Salon Des Refuses so that everyone can get a sense of the whole picture.

Alongside the NATSIAA there is now a vibrant and busy program of exhibitions in the local commercial and institutional galleries with more than a dozen exhibition openings in the 48-hour window of opportunity just prior to and immediately after the NATSIAA opening, before all the curators and collectors have gone home or out to the communities. A well organized bus tour is organised to ensure you can see them all in one day!

Darwin Festival, Aug 11-28,
www.darwinfestival.org.au

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Associate Director

Performance Space is a key national centre for contemporary interdisciplinary arts and hybrid performance practice. Our current home in Redfern has a theatre, studio and two gallery spaces and acts as an international focal point for a diverse range of practitioners and audiences committed to formally and conceptually innovative interdisciplinary and hybrid arts practices. In the next two years, the company is preparing for a major shift as we negotiate our role at the new Carriageworks Centre for Contemporary Performance.

We are looking to appoint a part-time Associate Director with curatorial experience in new media and contemporary art to work in a programming team with another Associate Director and the Director.

For job description & selection criteria call 02 9698 7235 or email: admin@performancespace.com.au

Applications close 5pm, 14 October