

Darwin: Hot enough for ya?

Suzanne Spinner

Everyone knows where they were on September 11. I was in Darwin watching CNN as it happened, in a house in Philip St, Fannie Bay (subsequently the subject of an ABC program, *Our Street*). Meanwhile a group of senior artists from Balgo on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, near the WA border, were en route by road to Darwin for the NATSIAA Aboriginal Art Award. They arrived that evening and I sat down with them to watch it all over again on the ABC news, and tried to imagine what the demise of New York looked like to them—like a video they said, scenes from a disaster movie. It looked the same to all of us... Eric Michaels, an anthropologist who famously studied the effects of the introduction of television in the Warlpiri desert community of Yuendumu, would have been perversely pleased by the egalitarianism of mediated disaster.

Michaels would also have enjoyed Djon Mundine's rant at the forum at Northern Territory University, organised by 24 HR Art, on "Criticism and Indigenous art or Sacred Cows and Bulls at the Gate", because Michaels wrote brilliantly about the whole vexed issue himself before his untimely death in 1988. Mundine, in black beret, racy red braces and the usual dreds, insisted that until Western art critics learnt Warlpiri as routinely as they might learn French, there could be no real progress in their understanding of Indigenous art. Other panellists—Benjamin Genocchio (art writer from *The Australian* and academics Ian McLean (*White Aborigines: a study of Gordon Bennett*) and Pat Hoffie—were more moderate. Mundine raised the difficulties of situating the subject amidst the territorial imperatives of the 2 great houses of academe, Anthropology and Fine Arts, and argued that most Indigenous art doesn't fit the canons of Western art, and to talk in a colloquial style smacks of colonialism and simplification, and to be a Modernist or Post-Colonialist tends to lead to mere comparison viz Aboriginal Cubism and other nonsenses.

Djon's own practice was predicated on his defining experience as an art advisor in NE Arnhemland where he took up the go-between role, translating and explaining the inside to the outside; cultural boundary riding. He cited his writing in *The Native Born* as an exemplar of his approach, where he creates a dialogue between

himself and the artists, and quotes extensively from interviews he has done with them. He also acknowledged that he takes an ideological position of not attacking Aboriginal people publicly (in case he's quoted by Keith Windshuttle in *Quadrant*)

Which brings us neatly back to Bad Aboriginal Art vide Michaels 1988—is there any? And if so, who says so? Michaels (like Mundine) says Indigenous art is the product of too many contradictory discourses that resist resolution. Genocchio acknowledged a pressing need for an engaged form of criticism but wasn't volunteering to hang himself on the wall in pyjamas to be a target. Hoffie and McLean were more forthcoming and accepted the responsibility of having an opinion—"not falling silent"—and finding a way to engage with the mythologies and reflect self-critically on the possibilities of cross cultural exchange by acting as an interpreter of a culture of which you are not part.

Meanwhile, at the Art Award, it was the usual big night out for all of us—artists, advisers, dealers, collectors, critics, and what seems every year to be more of the whole of Darwin—who gave a standing ovation on the lawn under the stars to the new Chief Minister and erstwhile Member for Fannie Bay, Clare Martin, the first woman, first Labor CM, since self-government. Spirits were high and there was a general feeling that the judges Bernice Murphy and Michael Riley had done good in awarding first prize to Dorothy Napangardi. There was also intense local pride in the win by Larrakia elder, Prince of Wales, in the Open painting section.

Art Award week is always a big one and, in recognition of this, an effort was made to coordinate the numerous exhibition openings which immediately follow the announcement. It was even advertised in the *NT News* as an "Art Crawl" and listed 5 openings on one day featuring Indigenous artists. This hectic day included a reception at Parliament House for the representatives of the Indigenous arts industry hosted by the new Member for Arafura, Marion Scrymgour, the first Indigenous woman MP (deputising for Clare Martin who was in Canberra for urgent talks on the Ansett collapse and its devastating impact on the NT). This was the first such reception and it would be neat to assume it was because of the

change of government, but I was assured it was well in train beforehand.

The Crawl began at 24 HR Art with Judy Watson's *Cumulus* series, continued to Cullen Bay, where Red Rock Art showed new work in ochre from established Kimberley artists, then back to town to the foyer of the Supreme Court, where a feast of paintings, prints and weavings from Milingimbi, Crocodile Islands, in Central Arnhemland were on view, and for sale at such reasonable prices they were snapped up on the day. Milingimbi was one of the earliest art centres established in the 70s but has been dormant for the last 15 years, so its resurgence was greeted with great enthusiasm by a large contingent of artists and town council members.

Flushed by their justified success at the Art Awards (in the Works on Paper category, for the suite of 30 etchings based on the historic *Yuendumu Doors* by Paddy Japaljarri Sims and Paddy Japaljarri Stewart), the *Northern Editions* opening at NTU Gallery was a highlight with a new batch of screenprints from Yirrkala, produced and editioned in the community. There were many bold works but Marmyula Mununggurr's linocut showing how Centrelink works outside the big towns combined her usual acute observation of Balanda ways—rows of people sitting at computer terminals—with her distinctive graphic style grounded in bark painting. The newest and smartest gallery for Indigenous art, Raft Artspace on Frances Bay, opened the first solo show of Balgo painter Elizabeth Nyumi. Again these luscious paintings of the fruitfulness of desert country in bloom were like confections in creamy pinks, reds and golden yellows, so thick and generous you wanted to eat them straight from the canvas.

In a week dominated by Indigenous art, was there any room for what becomes in the context the 'other' art? Yes, some. Local sculptor Judith Durnford opened her first solo show *Moves, Moves Not* at Woods St Gallery—132 pairs of shoes made of paperbark. Later Durnford packed up the fragile footwear and flew off to Japan where she exhibited them again, managing to link the Top End and Japan in a unique exchange of culture.

At Browns Mart, Knock-Em-Down Theatre and Darwin Theatre Company produced *ROAD*

HOUSE, a season of 4 new one act plays. Knock-Em-Down is the brainchild of Stephen Carleton and Gail Evans, and rightly describes itself as "a strident new voice" that "probes life at the northern edge." *ROAD HOUSE* is a companion piece to their 1999 season, *BLOCK*, which was based in a block of flats in urban Darwin. There are no wimpy half measures here, no ersatz Southern sophistication; they rework the Frontier Myth into a new genre, Territory Gothic. In *ROAD HOUSE* the drover's wife wakes in fright at the Bates Motel—the road's flooded, she can't leave—and outside a serial killer lies in wait to snatch her baby!

Four plays, 4 writers—Carleton and Evans plus Marian Devitt and Andrew McMillan—directed by Carleton, Evans and Ken Conway, and performed by an ensemble of 10 actors including Carleton, Evans and Conway. The brief: it happens in a roadhouse and no-one can leave. Gail Evans' *Burden*, which she described as an "ugly play" with a simmering background of serial killing, was powerfully disturbing. It also had the stand out performance by Merrilee Mills as Bet, the catatonic, droll religious fanatic who had us mesmerised with her opening: "Hot enough for ya?" We are appalled but on side. "You oughta get yourself looked at", her man Jack (played with sensitivity by Conway) mutters out of the side of his mouth and we agree. As the investigation into the bodies that keep turning up goes on, Bet ponders in a very spooky way, "maybe I served the killer petrol." Maybe she did. Carleton's *Forbidden Tongues* *Whispered in a Night of Desert Rapture* was lighter (anything would have been), a mix of satire and magic realism bringing together 2 Sydney gay boy types and a local harpy. Conway's direction was the best in show, and Gail Evans' performance as Lurleen (the chatelaine of the roadhouse) was a high camp treat. Devitt's *Deadline* was strong on immersion in the local—the flooded cabins and the blocked writer en route to Timor—but it foundered in the diffuseness of its universal insights. While McMillan's *Dingo Calling* was a collection of separate bizarre character schticks, never able to get a dynamic going, although Bob Scheer's portrayal of the superbly organised and well informed teutonic tourist was a delight with some amusing overtones of Bruce Chatwin, just

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as Amelia Hunter's hippy mother, Sunbeam, wickedly recalled the Lindy story.

A significant feature of all these plays was the tendency to go paranormal—spiritual, New Age or cosmic phenomena—when the writer wanted to up the ante in the narrative tension or character conflict; unfortunately this often results in flaccid and predictable denouements. Invariably I find, whether it's one act plays or short stories, I want the ones I like to be longer, yet that belies the exercise and probably would strain the material. Each play, like each Territory roadhouse (as McMillan said) has a distinct character because of the person who runs it.

Suzanne Spinner flew to Darwin on Ansett frequent flyer points for 6 days, was stranded and stayed 14, coming home eventually and expensively on Qantas.



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