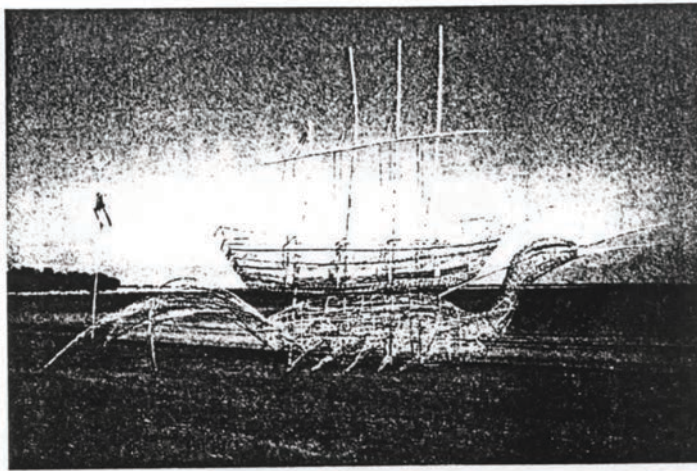


site seen:

The Festival of Darwin; Art Head Land + Ngapa

by Suzanne Spinner



Techy Mesaro, *Taking Off*, 1996. Bamboo. Photo: Chris Colton.

Art Head Land, the sculpture component of the Festival of Darwin, was described by Festival Director, Fabrizio Calafuri, "as a collection of context or site specific temporary installation works in public places". The works I will discuss all established a necessary and imperative relationship with their immediate surroundings.

Migration Sites: On Mindil Beach on the wide margin of hard sand between the low water mark and the high tide line, Chilean born artist, Techy Mesaro made *Taking Off*, a large bamboo sculpture, some fifteen metres long and eight metres high consisting of a mythical bird carrying a boat on its back, rather like the bird in the Arabian Nights which carried Sinbad the Sailor. The fine long open beak of the bird and the prow of the boat pointed into the wind and toward the sea. It was constructed around four massive bamboo poles dug deep into the sand, which formed the masts of the boat.

Further along this beach there are wooden cradles into which, at low tide, cranes lift keeled boats to wait for the incoming tide to float them off. In *Taking Off*, the bamboo bird was the cradle, its long wing tips sweeping the sand and it seemed to be ready to launch the bamboo boat on a long journey across the Arafura Sea to somewhere else. During the highest tides twice monthly, when the water level rises up to three metres, the body of the bird was submerged and the boat did seem to float on the sea.

As you came down onto the beach, with the setting sun behind it, the structure looked airy, it might have been made of copper wire, the light making a delicate tracery of lacy shadows on the sand. Around the bird boat Mesaro had placed tall bamboo totems presaging a safe journey or a welcome for those arriving from across the sea.

Since arriving in Darwin five years ago, Mesaro has made many large sculptures from local native bamboo for public pageants and this year she again worked with a number of community groups to make bamboo floats. The Spirit House or Haus-Tambaran she made with the Papua New Guinea community was thatched with palm fronds and decorated with a panel of painted spirits.

Bamboo was also the material for a work made by the local East Timorese community as part of the Darwin Fringe Festival. They made an Uma Lulik—a sacred house—a small square house on stilts with a tall thatched roof. The traditional sacred proportions and decorations had been modified for public show-

ing, the purpose here being to present a constructed symbol of the community's continuing struggle against the Indonesian government. It was sited in front of the ruins of the Old Darwin Town Hall, and later dismantled and sent to a new site in Sydney.

Campsites: Since 1991 Dolly Nampitjinpa Daniels, a Walpiri artist from Yuendumu and Anne Mosey, a white artist originally from Sydney have been working together, both as visual artists and on community development at Yuendumu. The results of their collaborations have been a series of parallel personal environments. For their work, *Nyurruwiyi*, *Nyurruwiyi/Long Time Ago*, Daniels decided she wanted to show how the Walpiri lived in her grandmother's time and she made a traditional humpy from Desert Oak boughs and woven spinifex thatched walls, constructed on a bed of red desert sand. All the materials were collected by Daniels and her family at Yuendumu, transported to Darwin and built inside 24 HR ART.

Mosey's companion piece was a representation of her grandmother's house, and it sat beside the fullsize humpy. Mosey's house by contrast was scaled down, its stone walls merely indicated by plan lines on the floor of the gallery. The comparison of the two subverted expectations: the humpy was substantial and solid and took on a monumental quality beside the bare bones of Mosey's house. There was no space between them; they butted against each other. Together they recreated the social-spatial relationship of Aboriginal camp life, and enacted Mosey and Daniels relationship 'Aboriginal way'.

Ngapa—Two Cultures One Country: *Ngapa*, by the Tracks Dance Collective and the Lajamanu Community, was installed/staged/made inside Browns Mart Theatre. It included performance and dance but the participants were neither acting nor dancing in a Western sense. They were primarily telling a story through reenactment, with everyone taking the role they played in the real event which was a journey back to country following the path of Ngapa Jukurpa, the Rainstorm Dreaming.

Participants played themselves and were themselves and showed us what happened on the trip, but first they made preparations for the journey. The women painted up and then danced and sang on one side, while on the other the men, who included kardiya, whitefellas Tim Newth and David McMicken, made a large sand drawing with ribbons of white and red clay, similar to those of the women's body painting. When the drawing was complete and the dancing finished there was a break. When we came back in everyone inside was ready for the trip.

The women had put T shirts over their ochred breasts everyone got in, or hung off the back of a 4WD truck (small enough to fit inside the theatre) and the journey began. Ar continued, punctuated by stops to chase goanna and of choice bush tucker, to inspect an important place, to make camp and sleep, and so it went, ending at the end of the trip. Over on the live action and dialogue was a recorded sound track which each participant talked, in their language, about who they were and why they were on this journey while panoramic views of the various sites and sights were projected.

It was all very low key and straightforward, the art residing in the veracity and understatement, yet it was completely engaging, moving and often very droll. In the end they didn't actually get to the intended spot but were made to turn back just short of it by an inscrutable but powerful old man who said, "No—Nother", and so they went back to where they began. So, just a life, as opposed to art, there was no climax—resolution and sure were missed but in the end the point was the journey the destination. And it all made for a good story anyway.

Sacred Sites: Richard Koolpinyah Barnes's *Ninety Nine Burial Markers* resanctified an existing Larrakia sacred site reminding us that this spot on the coastal reserve alongs Mindil Beach was part of an extensive burial ground. The nine markers were placed in an arrow formation that mimicked the shape of a barbed spearhead which was peculiar to Larrakia. Each marker was formed from a diagonal made of steel star picket, which is a sign of white occupation, driven into the ground with a cross piece of bush timber. They were painted white to represent the white ochre used for funerals and decorated with red and yellow ochre markings indicating ceremonial. The randomly shaped cross pieces pointed in various directions to warn people, "burial here". Barnes made ninety nine markers as a way of pointing out that no one knows how many Larrakia are buried here, as during the construction of the nearby Cas many bones were dug up.

Jimmy Wululu is an artist from Ramingining in Arnhem Land who paints on bark and carves hollow log coffins. For Great Hall of the recently built Northern Territory Parliament House, he made a large sand sculpture, titled *Waterhole*. The Hall is a grand marble cathedral lit by a high wall of glass beyond which you can see Darwin Harbour, and is a place rich shiny surfaces and glossy reflections.

Waterhole, a recreation of a Bongu or sand sculpture related to a particular waterhole and a spiritual site where the souls of unborn family members await their physical realisation. In the centre was a crater-like depression with finely curved sides and on either side two long shallow indentations, possibly suggesting the depressions made by a spear in the sand, created a frame around the circle. The fine sand took on a pinkish glow from the colour of the marble around it and the reflections of the sky on the shiny marble turned it into a watery mirror so that the sacred waterhole seemed to float above the floor.

For me it was these works which spoke so eloquently of migration, nature, camp and sacred sites, that informed and defined what it is to live here, in this place, in this climate, at this time, alongside these people. All had meanings specific to the materials and circumstances of Darwin and the Top End and at the same time they avoided a parochial rhetoric. Their very embeddedness in this place enabled them to stand alone in their place.