

ripe

24HR Art, September, 1999

Co-curated with Geraldine Tyson

ripe celebrates the work of emerging artists in the Northern Territory in 1999. This exhibition is one of a series being hosted across the nation, funded by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council Emerging Artist Initiative. The exhibition provides a small glimpse into the diverse and innovative range of conceptual and expressive practice occurring across the northern Territory in 1999. The exhibition brings together eight emerging artists: Serena Khul, Carol Napangardi Gallagher, Niningka Lewis, Russell Lilford, Camilla Lawson, Narputta Nangala Jugadai, Andrea Nungurrayi martin, and Richard Patterson.

'Emerging' is a problematic descriptive term. An emerging artist is currently defined as someone who has begun professional practice within the past five years post formal study. This definition is constantly shifting to accommodate a range of starting points and differing cultural norms. Most of the non-Indigenous artists represented in ***ripe*** are recent university graduates, however for the Indigenous artists their artistic training takes place from birth. The question begs, at what point is an artist described as emerging or 'emerged' on the continuum of a professional career.

There is a large transient population of artists who come to the Territory, stay for a while and move on. So much so that often the act of 'emerging' is synonymous with leaving and returning to the metropolis. For some of the artists in ***ripe*** that will happen, others however, will stay. For some artists leaving is not an option. They are tied to their communities and their country and derive their culture and identity from it.

When we think of the word ripe we generally think of luscious, juicy fruit, poised to be plucked, picked from obscurity, consumed and enjoyed. On one level the artists in this show are a new crop in the Territory. Each of them presents a fresh view of a constantly recurring theme in the NT – that of interaction with the natural environment that so dominates the region.

The theme of ***ripe*** was derived from the concerns addressed in the proposals of the emerging artist we invited to participate in the initiative. Each of these artists was working with material or subject matter derived from plant or animal life abundant in their region. A distinct sense of place is inherent in the works. Interactions with the natural world are an integral part of the lives of the indigenous artist, but also surprisingly for many non-Indigenous artists.

The different environments and terrains conjured and represented in the exhibition encompass the vastness of space and the diversity of conditions in the Territory, everything from the permanent summer of suburban back yards to the arid, wild lands in the Centre. Generally the artists have taken an intimate view of the environment, exploring the minutiae and revealing a personal view of the natural world.

However, the imposing physicality of the country cannot be avoided. Seasonal rhythms and the environment permeate every experience. The artists live amongst it and with it. The abundant, tropical Top End is a moist and fecund world, lush with vegetation. The trees are weighted down with seeding fruit, heavy and full, and as they ripen, become pungent with decay. This view can seem at odds with the sparseness of the centre and the expectation that the desert is an arid, lifeless void. The truth is that the desert is redolent with life, ready to burst into flower and fruit at the first drop of rain. Animal life lurks hidden from the casual observer, a lush store of bush tucker. This desert in the centre of Australia reveals a different, more subtle form of ripeness.

The environments explored by these artists reveal more than physical descriptions of habitats. The works also evoke relationships between spiritual and natural forces, cultural practice and political statement.

Cath Bowdler and Geraldine Tyson, 1999

Narputta Nangala Jugadai

Narputta was born at Karrkurutinytja or Lake MacDonald. She started painting in August 1992 at Ikuntji Women's Centre at Haasts Bluff and paints her country which includes her father's country and all the associated Tjukurrpa for these places. Her work varies between the expressive and spontaneous and her quite meticulous renderings of plants and seeds. She generally also alternates between works about the salt lake of her birth place and the bush tucker paintings which she calls 'hungry paintings'. In this show Narputta paints the Mangata or quandong tree and its seeds which are ground for making damper. The explosion of colour and form in her paintings suggests the enormous vitality of this country and its abundant physical and spiritual layers.

Niningka Lewis

Pitjantjatjara artist Niningka Lewis was born in the Western Desert somewhere between Areonga and Temple Downs. She now lives on Pipalyatjara Community and like many women artists in that region makes carved, poker-worked animals - goanna, eagles and rabbits, from the roots of the red river gum. Niningka however stands out from the group because of her constant innovations and the fresh vision which she brings to this traditional medium, painting the animals brightly and combining them in unusual but realistic ways. Her works have recently been singled out and sought by curators for travelling

shows because of their quirky sensibility. The pieces in this show are equally unusual – the emu feather baskets combined with the birds and seeds, merge two traditional forms - carving and basket-making. The work suggests a view of country where everything is linked and interdependent. Niningka states, “ I observe and later carve, thinking about it working independently....Sometimes I’m thinking of Tjukurrpa...And other people are thinking “that’s right, there is Aboriginal Law in the dunes and creek beds”.

Richard Paterson

Richard Paterson is a printmaker residing and working in Alice Springs who takes the traditional methods of printmaking and extends them, often creating installations with the results. He has been concentrating on the flora of the region, executing sensitive, almost botanical images, reminiscent of the Renaissance masters. He prints these etched images onto dental dams, which have the quality of skin and are displayed so that they move ever so slightly when approached by a viewer. The combination of this subject matter and the unusual medium create a landscape of incredible fragility, intimate in scale, ephemeral by nature. These are metaphors for the country, which suggest fecundity as well as delicacy, incongruous yet absolutely apt. The image of the desert pea typifies this contradiction, fragile and tough at the same time.....a beautiful survivor.

Russell Lilford

Russell Lilford is one of the few performance artists living in the Top End. Usually known as a painter, Lilford has built up a body of strange, humorous, intensely personal performances over recent years. They hark back to the modernist tradition of anarchic, Dadaesque absurdity. In these performances Lilford has explored themes of masculinity and sexuality by channelling energy and releasing humour through riotous acts of self-parody and symbolic movement. Like the other performances “Watermelon Cherry Ripe” involves the creation of a complex costume and a ritualistic playing out of personal narrative. In this instance the watermelon is a metaphor for the feminine and Lilford’s actions question the role of the masculine and how it is perceived.

Camilla Lawson

Camilla is a painter and installation artist based in Darwin. In recent years her work has explored the domestic space as a temporal landscape that contextualises a shifting definition of ‘the body’. The expansive format of Camilla Lawson’s painting *Here, this instant, now in the sun* forces the viewer into a physical confrontation with the subject. The fragmented narrative ensures that a single settled view point is not possible. The boundaries between interior/exterior, private/public, visible/hidden and remembered/dream are blurred. Superimposed transparent layers evoke Darwin’s suburbia. Hints of the tropical garden, a floating dreamlike body and the domestic confines of the home reveal complex stratified worlds within worlds.