

Emotional Striptease

Christian Bumbarra Thompson

24HR Art, 16 August - 6 September

I have an admission to make...I didn't go to the opening of *Emotional Striptease* at 24HR Art. It was the first opening on the morning after, what is now known as the 'Telstras' was launched, and the beginning of the furious round of Indigenous exhibitions and events that now accompany the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award every year in Darwin. This year, in its 20th incarnation, the whole circus that was the 'Art Awards', and especially the opening event at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, seemed different and somewhat disappointing... More of that later.

Many Darwin galleries schedule exhibitions of Indigenous art during this time, naturally capitalising on the hoards of buyers, curators and media who arrive for NATSIAA, turning the weekend into a huge crawl from one show to the next. These exhibitions generally feature collectible contemporary paintings and prints from remote communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Among the more interesting satellite shows this year were *Jirruwun Jazz* at Raft Artspace and Regina Wilson at Karen Brown Gallery and *Emotional Striptease* at 24HR Art.

Melbourne based photographer and installation artist Christian Bumbarra Thompson's *Emotional Striptease* was a marked contrast to most of the other shows that accompanied the 'Art Award'. Christian Thompson's almost life sized photographic portraits of his young, 'blak' contemporaries turned an assured gaze back at the viewer. The subjects posed in remnants of mock colonial costume and urban black, each holding an Aboriginal artefact. This confident re-appropriation of colonial tropes of Indigenous representation, was originally commissioned for Melbourne Fashion Week's cultural program and the images had something of the cool, sexual allure of fashion photography.

Emotional Striptease is an apt name for this show, largely concerned with peeling back layers and exposing and challenging traditional representations of Indigenous identity. In the colonial tradition Indigenous subjects were often positioned against Romantic painted backdrops that emphasised the subject's displacement from their environment. This body of work sites Thompson's contemporaries and himself in their current cultural landscape, in front of Melbourne's dazzling architectural facades. They are entirely at home.

Emotional Striptease is in every sense urban Indigenous art. The locations of the photographs are emphatically and pointedly sited in the sophisticated hub of the city. The backdrops are in fact the bastions of European culture where, among other things, the original colonial representations and the artefacts reside. Issues of identity politics are thrown into high relief in these settings.

In his catalogue essay, "Turning Tricks for Colonial Kicks", Thompson states: "For Indigenous people to access our culture it must be negotiated through a European bureaucracy. For an Indigenous person to authenticate themselves we must confirm to Eurocentric definitions. An Aboriginal cannot be an Aboriginal, you must be of Aboriginal extraction or descent." The major concerns of this artist and many urban artists are the re-interpretation of modes of representation and of identity in relation to authenticity. Thompson is referring to white notions of authenticity, which have defined some indigenous art/artists as more authentic than others, à la George Orwell. This body of work is about empowerment and takes an interesting slant on the traditional/urban, nature/culture debate.

Unfortunately this issue became one of the leitmotifs of this year's 'Art Awards', set in some ways by the overall winner, Richard Bell. In his acceptance speech he remarked that it was about time that the domination of the award by 'traditional' artists was over, as if there were some sort of contest: traditional v urban. Richard Bell also caused quite a stir with his T-shirt, "White Girls Can't Hump" (actually an artwork), carefully calculated to gain maximum exposure.

This aside, his monumental painting, "Bells Theorem: Aboriginal Art, It's a White Thing", seemed a remarkably appropriate and relevant NATSIAA winner this year. Bell also used the strategy of appropriation, this time of European modernist painting. To me the political stance expressed in the painting was totally on the money. Unfortunately this year the 'Art Award' opening and much of what surrounded it, had never felt more white, more controlled, less Aboriginal focused or more dollar driven. The Art Award opening was once an exhilarating, exciting, inclusive and celebratory event, which has now become a shadow of its former self: safe, segregated and under control, (except for the entertaining Mr Bell). It was also hard not to see Christian Thompson's show at 24HR Art as somehow removed from what was the rather disgusting feeding frenzy that was going on elsewhere in Darwin as investment buyers invaded galleries, desperate to put red dots on almost anything.

On a positive note there was still great art to be seen in many venues. No doubt the 'Art Award' will continue and the amazing variety and quality of the art in the show itself and many of the satellite shows will remain vibrant. The concern of Indigenous artists with issues of identity spans the spectrum of works from the desert to the city and exhibitions like *Emotional Striptease* stand alongside shows such as *Jirruwun Jazz*, combining to give an overall impression of the strength, vitality and diversity of contemporary Indigenous visual culture.

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