

The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin: Yesterday, today and tomorrow

CATH BOWDLER



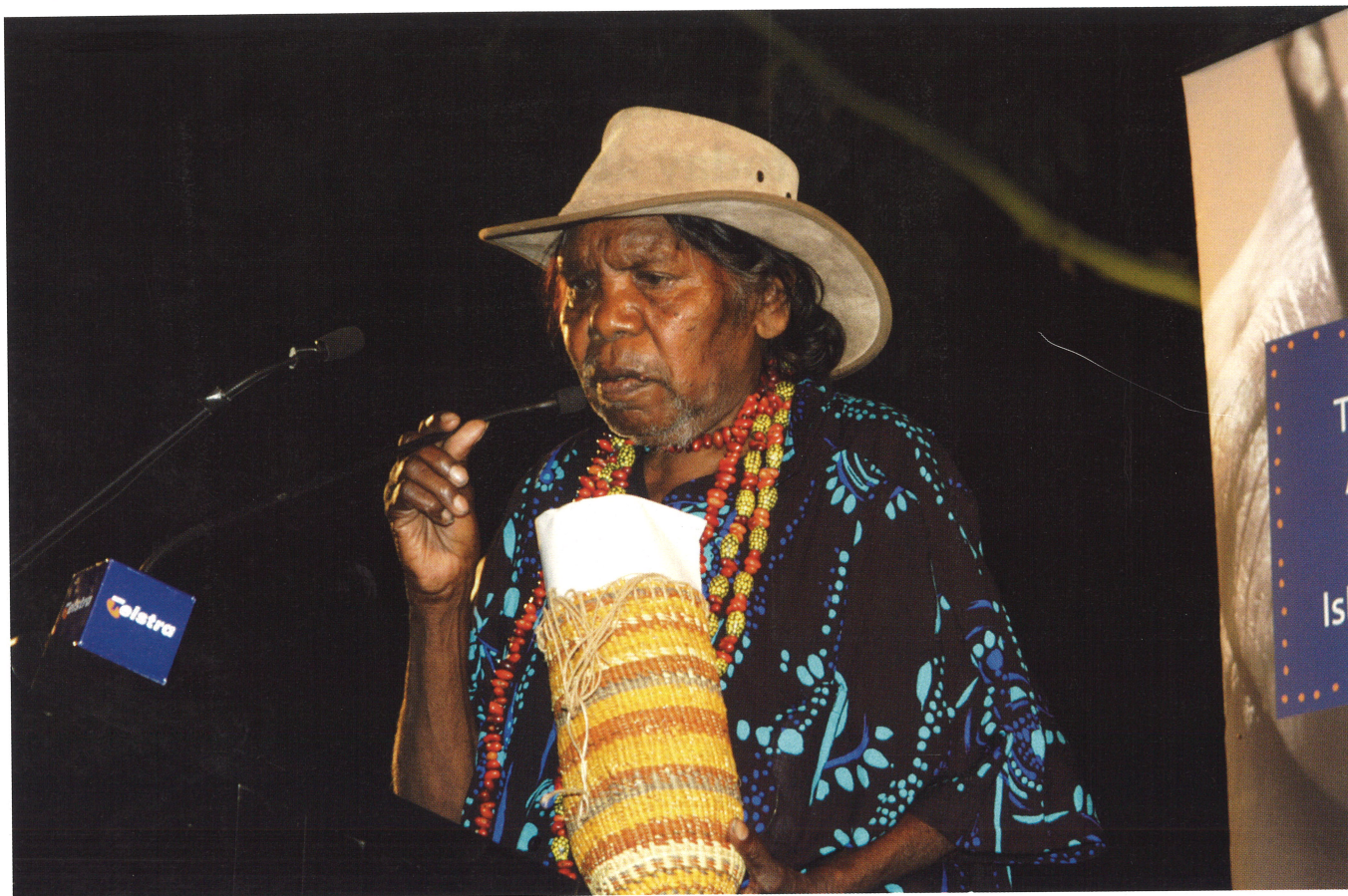
The Kril Kril dance performed as a tribute to Rover Thomas in the gardens of the Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, at the opening of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 1998. Photo courtesy of Red Rock Art.

The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA), first held in 1984, is more than an art exhibition. It is an evolving cultural phenomenon, a celebration of pan-national Indigenous culture, with a rich history. These days its opening is positioned just after the Garma Festival, and on the first weekend of the Festival of Darwin, which has an ever-increasing Indigenous focus. NATSIAA also launches, on the following day, a furious crawl around a host of Darwin venues that present a feast of Indigenous art to capitalise on the hordes of buyers, curators and media in town for the weekend. This is a mini visual arts festival in itself that has emerged organically over the last five years.

Marion Scrymgeour, the first Indigenous Northern Territory Minister of Arts and Museums, noted at the 23rd Telstra NATSIAA opening this year that the Award exhibition positions Darwin as 'the nation's cultural capital', if only for a brief period annually. Over two decades down the track, NATSIAA has developed from humble beginnings into a major national event. However, as a celebration of Indigenous culture I would argue that it has lost some of its magic in the last couple of years, and is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success. There has been a recent changing of the guard at the

Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) after a hiatus in 2005, which followed the resignation of the long-serving Curator of Aboriginal Art, Margie West. NATSIAA is now under the stewardship of MAGNT's first Indigenous curator of Aboriginal Art and Material Culture, Franchesca Cubillo. It is perhaps a good time to reflect on what the Award is and where it might head in the future.

Before looking forward I want to look back at some highlights over the fifteen years I have been attending NATSIAA. Much has changed and it is hard not to look back nostalgically to the early 1990s when the event was much smaller and less structured. From the beginning, the Award involved a music and dance component in acknowledgement of the integral relationship between Indigenous art and cultural life. Sometimes this performance element seemed as significant as the exhibition. Margie West, the former MAGNT curator and instigator of the Award, remembers some amazing moments that predate my time in the Territory but highlight the organic nature of the opening event in its early years. One of the most celebratory occurred in the late eighties, when the Yuendumu dancers had been invited to perform at the opening. Just as they finished their performance a large group of ladies from Lajamanu



Linda Syddick Napaltjarri receives the Telstra General Painting Award this year for *The witch doctor and the windmill*. Courtesy of MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.

sitting in the audience spontaneously got up and joined in, dancing their component of that Dreaming; a chance at cultural exchange and continuity afforded by their being together in the one place and being allowed a measure of spontaneity.

I remember the moving tribute to Rover Thomas performed at the NATSIAA opening in 1998, the year of his death. It was planned in advance, and Queenie McKenzie and other senior members of the Warmun community re-created the original song and dance cycle of Rover's dream in a way that could be performed publically. The Gurirr Gurirr (Kril Kril) was enacted with dancers carrying painted boards on their shoulders, moving with enormous conviction and emotion. It was a special gift to the audience and it felt as if we were witnessing history unfold.

Tiwi dancers enacted another kind of history in 1995 when they performed the Aeroplane Dance. The crowd surrounded the dancers as they morphed from performing the Buffalo dance to assume the pose of planes with their arms outstretched. The dancers began wheeling around and simulating plane noises to the sound of clapsticks as other dancers took up the position of gunners, shooting the animated aircraft down. The dance

ended as the planes spiralled out of control and crashed into the sand. This dance, which was first performed to commemorate the Second World War bombing of Darwin and the Tiwi Islands by Japanese Zeros, was an exhilarating and captivating experience. Not long after, most of the crowd was dancing together on the sand to the Aboriginal band. It was quite a party.

That same year, when Tiwi artist Pedro Wonaeamirri presented the award to the overall winning artist, marked the beginning of the NATSIAA tradition of Indigenous performers presenting the prizes to their peers in dilly bags. These presentations, when dancers sometimes teased the winners, expressively dancing near and then playfully out of reach, have always been a highlight. I remember dignified Kimberley cowboys dressed nattily in enormous hats striding across the sand pit to retrieve their prize from a basket held between the teeth of a painted-up dancer from Arnhem Land. This type of thing still happens, but it is somehow different when the presenters have to climb stairs to a large stage surrounded by arc lights and screens. There was a strong sense during the 1990s that the award was primarily for Aboriginal people, that their concerns were paramount and that the important interface between contemporary

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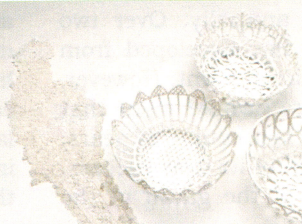
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art and cultural practices was fully acknowledged.

By 2000 the Award had grown exponentially and the accompanying performances became larger and more lavish productions. In that year the Neminuwarlin Dance Group performed a narrative *Massacre joonba*, with a large cast of community members. This was the first time that this important *joonba* (a song and dance cycle) was performed for non-Aboriginal people; it was later developed into *Fire Fire Burning Bright* and appeared at the Perth and Melbourne Festivals. The original performance in Darwin was an emotional and revelatory theatrical event, and the first time that elaborate staging was used on the lawns of MAGNT for the NATSIAA opening. The tiered seating also appeared at this point in response to the increased crowds, now about 1,000, many of who complained they couldn't see the dancing. Continuing the trend towards sophisticated staging, in 2002 the Sydney-based Bangarra Dance group performed a poignant, fully choreographed piece.

However in recent years the emphasis on cultural performance as an integral component of the Award has diminished. There has also been a significant change in mood. This is not a criticism of Franchesca Cubillo's work, as control of this aspect of the Award was taken out of the hands of the Aboriginal Art curator in 2002, and the recently established Art Award Coordinator's position was transferred instead to the exhibitions department of the Gallery. (I understand this year the coordinator had to fight management and sponsors to keep the sand pit in front of the stage for dancing.)

This year the Red Flag Dancers from Numbulwar gave out the prizes, but did not dance other than in their role as prize-givers. There were, however, some memorable moments when they delivered the prizes to winners. Two confident and talented young dancers sent sand spinning into the air with the exuberance of their dancing on their way to deliver the Bark Painting Award to Samuel Namunjda. And the lone woman who danced with such conviction and beauty to present Judy Watson with her prize brought many to tears, including the artist. There are no longer enough of these magic moments as the official speeches get longer



Linda Syddick Napaltjarri, *The witch doctor and the windmill*, synthetic polymer paint on linen. Courtesy of the artist and MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.

and the performances get shorter. The once open space is now enclosed and dominated by tiered seating, restricting the opportunities for performance, general movement and communication. Everything is focused on the stage where the dignitaries sit and the artists make their speeches. It has become overly managed, hierarchical and corporate in feel. In comparison with how it used to be it's hard not to agree with Richard Bell's summation. It really does feel like 'a white thing'.

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Alma Kalaju Webou, *Pinkalarta*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.

The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award has always been about more than the art. It was a good natured, annual get-together, a time when artists and their relatives, curators and gallerists, journalists and art writers, art advisers, collectors, locals and long grassers all mingled together, schmoozing and dancing to top Aboriginal bands outdoors on the pandanus-fringed lawns of MAGNT. The NATSIAA opening was once an exhilarating, inclusive and celebratory event, accompanied by extraordinary and often spontaneous expressions of cultural connection and generosity. This was when grog and food was served before being supplanted by bottled water and blankets! Don't get me wrong – a lot of people loved their Telstra blankets (despite the inescapable irony of such a gesture), but they

might have liked a glass of wine or a beer and some nibbles with that.

All of this and we haven't yet been inside to look at the art. Again thinking back to former years, I remember dragging myself away from the festivities downstairs, walking into the Gallery and being knocked backwards by the power of the art. Most memorable for me was in 1994 when, on reaching the top of the stairs, I was mesmerised by a host of floor-to-ceiling three-metre barks from Yirrkala which vibrated off the wall. In other years I remember walking from one section of the exhibition to the next, gasping at the beauty of works from Balgo shimmering on one wall, next to rippling fields of paint from Papunya on another, talking excitedly to others about the wonder of the whole show and discovering art I had never seen the likes of before. There has always been knockout work in the exhibition, and of course there still is.

NATSIAA has been a vehicle for demonstrating the vibrancy and diversity of Indigenous creativity. From its inception in 1984 it was designed to be a survey show of contemporary Indigenous art from across the country. There was resistance in some quarters to the notion of showing urban art next to what was then considered traditional Indigenous art. The Award has had a significant role to play in the now generally accepted view that all Aboriginal art made today is contemporary art and that it should all be given equal weight and value. Despite some views to the contrary, one of the great strengths of NATSIAA has been its proactive and continued encouragement of urban Indigenous artists as exhibitors, selectors and judges.

NATSIAA as an institution has represented virtually all the major Aboriginal artists at one time

or another. It has recorded changes in art centre practice and in *avant garde* practices hot off the press: from the beautiful Utopia batiks to the giant barks from Yirrkala; from the creative ceramics at Hermannsburg and the Tiwi Islands to the 3D fibre movement at Maningrida and art glass from the desert; from digital prints to video installation. NATSIAA is still the only broad-based survey of what is happening in Indigenous art across the country in any given year. It does not need defending on these grounds.

However, there has been criticism in recent years, including this one, regarding the variable quality of art in the show. Many observers have felt that better quality work has been exhibited in the various satellite shows in Darwin,



Nawurapu Wunungmurra, *Makani – Queenfish*, natural pigments on Kapok wood. Courtesy of the artist and MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.

in particular at Raft Gallery (in Parap) and, this year, at Red Rock Art (located in Kununurra, WA, showing in Darwin at Cullen Bay). This tendency was most clearly in evidence this year in relation to Tiwi art, where the art consigned to the Award was considerably less spectacular than that in the Tiwi Art Network selling show *Yirrajirima murrakupuni ngawurraningimarri* (*Three places coming together*) set up in the Smith Street Mall in Darwin. To some extent these exhibitions are now competing with NATSIAA for the best works, which they can be assured of selling.

Any criticism of NATSIAA needs to consider just what the Award is and what are its aims. Is it a regionally inclusive survey exhibition or a showcase of the best Aboriginal art produced in the last year? Is it a snapshot of the most recent trends or a display of excellence? Does the Award need to have the most prestigious works by major artists or is it more important to encourage emerging artists and take risks? These things are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but a sense of uncertainty about intention can affect outcomes of the exhibition at the pre-selection level.

Franchesca Cubillo spoke about NATSIAA recently on ABC Radio National's *Away!* program (whose focus is national Indigenous arts and

culture). She talked about the current exhibition, noting the decision to cull the selection down from 297 entries to the final eighty-two, a smaller-than-normal field. The smaller selection suits the gallery space, while the removal of the bulky craft showcases has also freed up the exhibition space considerably. Cubillo spoke about the rich intersections in the current show between the works of artists from different regions and backgrounds. It is clear that regional inclusiveness is important in her vision for the future, as is wide representation of different



Archie Moore, *Maltheism*, paper. Courtesy of the artist and MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.



Baluka Maymuru with his work, *Dhakandjali*, this year's winner of the Wandjuk Marika 3D Memorial Award. These three memorial poles, made of natural pigments on wood, are for Manggalili clan people. Courtesy of the artist and MAGNT. Photo Gilbert Herrada.

media to reflect diverse forms of Indigenous creativity. She particularly called for more representation from the Torres Strait and Tasmania, and encouraged emerging artists and art centres to enter alongside their more established peers. This idea of regional inclusiveness and openness to new styles has been a hallmark of NATSIAA from the beginning and must be taken into account when judging the Award a critical success or not.

I would have to say that in the last two years in particular the exhibition has not been as strong aesthetically over all as it has been in the past. That is not to say there were not wonderful works in this year's show and some good decisions by the judges. Linda Syddick Napaltjarri's *The witch doctor and the windmill* is a worthy winner of the General Painting Award. The artist had previously exhibited over ten years ago with *ET returning home*, depicting the innocent alien as a lost child, a metaphor for her longing for her own homelands. Her sense of invention and the dynamism of her painting style is still clearly in evidence. Judy Watson's *a preponderance of aboriginal blood*, a moving and deeply political work, is a laudable winner of the Work on Paper Award. I also really enjoyed Alma Kalaju Webou's standout painting *Pinkalarta* and Nawurapu Wunungmurra's installation *Makani – Queenfish* as well as Archie Moore's modest but touching construction of a paper mission building out of the pages of an open bible, *Maltheism*. Baluka Maymuru's suite of burial poles, *Dhakandjali*, beautifully encodes and interweaves complex

iconography depicting Yolngu concepts of life and death. This work won Baluka the Wandjuk Marika 3-D Memorial Award (which he had previously won almost twenty years ago) and his acceptance provided another highlight of the opening ceremony this year. NATSIAA's ability to show the development of artists' careers over time within its own history is one of its defining legacies.

This year it seemed to me that, despite a relatively small showing, there were more interesting works from urban-based artists than from some community art centres. And to be honest there were a number of ordinary works selected. Art Centres such as Buku Larrnngay Mulka and Maningrida Art and Culture are represented with consistently good art and their artists are regular winners. However even from these esteemed art centres some of the major artists are no longer in the competition. One of the reasons for this was the acquisitive nature of the prize. Market forces dictated the decision this year to make the major prize non-acquisitive, so the winning artist(s) can now pick up a \$40,000 cheque and still sell their work independently. The increasingly stratospheric prices achieved for living artists' work has made the \$40,000 price cap outdated for many artists whose works attain considerably higher prices.

There is enormous pressure on art centres from serious collectors and gallerists to set aside their best work for selling exhibitions. One hears of waiting lists of two years to acquire the works of the most desirable Indigenous artists. Some art coordinators have complained

in recent years that they have kept what they consider to be very strong works to submit to NATSIAA only to have them knocked back in the pre-selection process. The obvious flaws inherent in selecting works based on photographic images cannot realistically be amended. This is the method by which nearly all other award exhibitions are selected and is not the heart of the problem. As one frequent pre-selection judge noted: 'People imagine that we're sitting there rejecting all these great works... it's simply not true. There are some years when there are just not enough top quality entries'. This can result in a show that may be not really strong in its entirety even though it contains many stunning individual works.

Nothing from Warlayirti Arts (Balgo) was selected for this year's Award despite three of the community's best-known artists submitting works for pre-selection. The art coordinator told me that when some Warlayirti clients heard that these major artists, including Eubena Nampitjin and Elizabeth Nyumi, had not been selected, they were outraged and offered to make an official complaint. The new co-ordinator was less surprised and took the view that the Award may now be more suited to mid-career and 'cutting edge' artists. In the case of Warlayirti this would mean extraordinary younger artists such as Christine Yukenberri. For art centres like Warlayirti a win at NATSIAA can really help emerging artists, but senior community artists at the height of their careers may no longer see inclusion in NATSIAA as crucial.

If NATSIAA wants to showcase the very best Indigenous art from across the country one of its future challenges will be to convince art centres and dealers to continue to submit their best work in numbers. If a truly regional representation is a major factor in pre-

selecting entries this should also be explicitly stated, as its inclusivity and 'pan-continental coverage' over and above aesthetic concerns has been one of the most trenchant criticisms levelled at the Award.

My earlier reminiscences are not intended to suggest that the halcyon days of NATSIAA are over forever; rather they are a reflection on the evolution of a cultural phenomenon and a recognition that things change. It is useful to look back occasionally, to glimpse the things that made an experience unique and valuable and to be aware of how those things can be lost in the process of success. It was inevitable that as NATSIAA grew in size and importance its intimate, spontaneous, and relaxed nature would change. No doubt financial constraints have informed some of these changes, but as MAGNT's flagship event and as a *bone fide* national treasure, NATSIAA should be resourced and funded adequately, and it is important for MAGNT and its major sponsor Telstra to ensure that its uniquely creative and egalitarian roots are honoured rather than diminished. Despite my reservations, there is, however, a sense of optimism for the coming years and I still wouldn't miss it for quids.

The 23rd Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award opened at the Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin on 12 August this year and is on display until 22 October.

Cath Bowdler is an artist, writer and curator based between Darwin and Canberra. She is currently completing Doctoral studies at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the ANU.

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