

OUTDOOR VISUAL ART

Craig Walsh and Judy Watson

Festival of Darwin

12 – 15 August, 2004

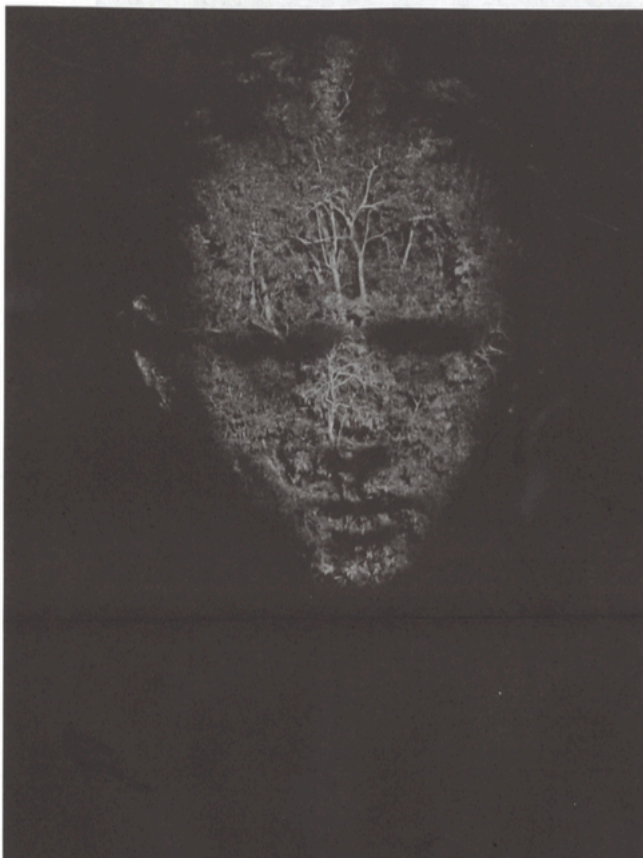
CATH BOWDLER

In Darwin during the late dry season you can be sure of a couple of things – temperate tropical nights, a cloudless sky full of stars and an increase in population. It's the perfect time to be outdoors. Increasingly event organisers are taking advantage of these conditions and choosing more sympathetic and appropriate venues. The focus of this year's Darwin Festival was the George Brown Botanical Gardens, host to many performances over the years, but not often used for the display of visual art. This year visual art formed a bigger part of the festival and the site was alive with an enticing and diverse array of temporary public art.

Approaching the site at night, the first thing visible from the road was a mass of lights amongst a field of giant coconut palms – an outdoor gallery with individual artworks attached to every trunk. This was the Galuku Gallery, which means palm tree in Yolngu Matha, where screenprints by artists from the Buku Larngay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala were illuminated by stems of light. This exhibition was the reinvention of the bush gallery from the Garma Festival which has been operating for the last three years in a stringy-bark grove near Yirrkala. Colourful and unrestrained, these beautifully executed works were not only designed by the Yolngu artists but printed by them at Buku Larngay Mulka Art Centre and were fine examples of the innovative work coming out of this part of Arnhem Land.

The Darwin Festival is now sensibly developing clear-cut links and synergies between the burgeoning Garma Festival at Yirrkala and the *Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award*. This is timely, as Garma, although rapidly growing, is not accessible for all and there are obvious crossovers and benefits of sharing performers, artists and audiences. The strong indigenous focus of these events in Darwin is being more widely appreciated and eagerly anticipated every year.

The Galuku Gallery operated as a intriguing entrance – further into the site the magical ambience was continued by perennial Festival public artist Tetchy Masero. Her work, which celebrates cultural diversity through association with Asian and indigenous cultural groups and the use of indigenous materials, has formed the foundation of public art in the Festival over many years. Nearly all of Masero's work is ephemeral, large-scale, interactive and site-specific. For this site, she created myriads of giant lanterns and other organic lighting features, which dotted the space and hung from huge overarching shade trees. She designed all the elements of the space,



including an ornate bamboo structure which formed the entrance way to the performance venue and a sandstone bar, creating an organic and inviting ambience. It was all very beautiful and somewhat predictable. What was not predictable was the further intervention of two other artists in the park, Craig Walsh and Ruth Watson. In the massive trees near the main Festival arena was Craig Walsh's imposing, yet subtle projection *Humanature*. The blinking of one eye, the suggestion of a yawn, was all that indicated that the enormous face emerging from the treescape was possibly alive. Walsh has presented video projections of faces onto trees worldwide. The slight nuances in these faces and the ambiguous fusing of the arboreal and the human worked spectacularly, both in the context of the other more static works and due to the particularly exaggerated scale of the natural environment. Nearby was Ruth Watson's *Cry Me A River*, a ground installation using her familiar motif of the map projection as the starting point. Watson has been investigating at length the structures of the map in her work – in this instance she created an unusual projection with Darwin as the central focus. Watson used different kinds of fertiliser as the medium for tracing out the image. This installation worked better in the daylight hours and had the strange effect of seeming to kill the grass around its periphery, while leaving a greener, richer after-image when the fertiliser was removed. The installation conveyed the notion that such projections are constructions, which represent different world views and ways of seeing. Anything that casts Darwin as the centre of the universe goes down well in this part of the world.

Outside the Botanical Gardens in Civic Park, the second instalment of *Sculpture in the Park*, a local temporary public art competition, again proved popular with both artists and public. There was a good representation of local artists, including Tobias Richardson's witty winning piece *Glimpse*. Richardson took an odd assortment of op shop-like objects – CD racks, kitschy sculptures etc. and painted them the same nauseating turquoise blue as the overbearing metalwork features in the Darwin Mall. These objects were then randomly inserted in odd places within the Mall, creating humorous juxtapositions with other features and the *in situ* public artworks. This piece was subtle and easily missed, its subversive humour and lack of preciousness being infectious.

Public art has been a source of often heated debate in Darwin for years. It is important to take that debate beyond the local and into a broader national context – 24hr Art is to be commended for curating this Temporary Art Project as an adjunct to *Sculpture in the Park*. The shift to exploring the merits of temporary public art is particularly important, as a desire for permanent monuments gives way to a more collaborative, less imposing view of art. For the time being, in this part of the world it's better to be left with the memory of a fleeting intervention, rather than the long-term domination of the monument.