

## Toga Art Catalogue Essay

There is a robust, talented and diverse community of non-Indigenous artists in the Northern Territory tackling concerns that have dominated European artistic engagement with the NT since 'whitefellas' first arrived in the 1880s. That is: the enormity of the landscape, the Aboriginal presence and the politics and history of place. In 2006, the imaging of the Northern Territory by Europeans, has been amply spotlighted by the landmark *Sound of the Sky* Exhibition. It highlighted these themes and how their representation has changed over the past 200 years. Not surprisingly a number of artists in Toga Art were represented in that show.

The Toga Art exhibition, however, has no overarching theme, other than the art be reflective of the Northern Territory in some way. It is neither definitive nor exhaustive, but includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists together and covers a variety of subject matter and media, including painting, photography, new media, printmaking and sculpture. The show presents a snapshot of contemporary art produced in the Northern Territory at this time and all the artists in this exhibition present work which is prescient and engaged with where they live.

Some artists in the exhibition respond to the difficult realities of cross-cultural contact, which is one of the defining characteristics on life in the region. Therese Ritchie's *Resurrection* is a perfect example of art that is arresting, compassionate and strong. It has subtle references to our colonial past and, unfortunately, to our still colonial present. It is not didactic but tackles this issue with honesty and clarity, synthesizing a specific, localised moment into a more widely resonant experience. Pam Lofts is another artist who confronts the cross-cultural encounter with the elegiac work, *Mightbe somewhere*. This photographic diptych speaks of abandonment, nostalgia and emptiness, unmistakably beautiful and 'all fucked up' at the same time.

Bronwyn Wright's *Hooded* also suggests nostalgia and absence by bringing a brooding, cinematic quality to the 'swamp dynamics' she has documented over the years. In this new body of work she plays with the unrequited, ambiguous, masculine energy, which has defined much of the 'outsider' activity on that particular suburban edge of Darwin. Resisting the temptation to romanticise the environment, a number of other artists also chose to explore the more metropolitan experience of life in the NT. Tobias Richardson's *Glimpse* reflects a certain sort of urban ugliness that can pervade in the often, failed experiments of urban design in the region. He uses an ironic and subversive humour, a recurrent theme in his work. Malcolm Smith's four-part animation, *Burning House*, also comments on the world of suburban alienation and isolation with a kind of 'Hitchcock-like', uncanny quality.

Other artists are drawn to themes of historical folly. Matt Huddleston and Rob Brown depict explorers, slightly dishevelled or absurd, rendered childlike and ineffective by the weight of the landscape and the immensity of the colonial project. Franck Gohier's monumental *Zero* represents another era.

He creates a synthesis of historical and contemporary references using a pop sensibility with a freshness and immediacy characteristic of his work.

One of the most pervasive and recurrent themes in Northern Territory art is the representation of landscape and how Europeans have engaged with it. Marina Strocchi chooses to portray the landscape through a form of hieroglyphic notation with beautifully stylised, repeated forms. Earthy, graphic and replete with signs, her depiction of an inhabited and vibrant country is alive with meaning. On the other hand Nerrida Stockly's intimate and lovingly rendered small sections of country speak of a faltering, elusive beauty, which subvert the desert's depiction as sublime and overwhelming. These create a subtle resonance with the work of Adrien Robinson. Dan Murphy's depictions of the central Australian landscape also share this elusive quality, which is made more intense by the sculptural materiality of metal and rust.

Another kind of poignancy can be seen in Monique Auricchio's dry point depictions 'animals' that seem familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Their figurative and spatial ambiguity and their vulnerability lead us to contemplate our relationship to the natural world and an ecology out of balance. Their intimate quality and subject matter reverberates nicely with the prints from Western Arnhem Land. Jodie Wilson's *Loloba*, a depiction of woman and companion dog in the landscape, reinterprets this recurring theme with a quirky charm.

? by Merran Sierrakowski sits within the long history of political art in the NT, which has been exemplified by such ventures as Green Ant Publishing and Red Hand Graphics. It is fitting that this rather 'dangerous' work is displayed in Parliament House as the issue of refugees remains on the political agenda. The material of razor wire is now forever associated with the miserable camps that housed and hid from public view those displaced persons. The resonance of a barbed and razor wire boat, foregrounded against the picturesque backdrop of Darwin harbour, is a powerful statement enhanced by its context and sculptural simplicity.

Many of the non-Indigenous artists included in this exhibition have been living in the NT for over a decade and their work is well known. In some ways their work has helped to shape our responses to living here in this region. Some of the more emerging artists are, naturally less well known, but full of promise. It is not easy to maintain a solid career as a visual artist in the NT and yet a number of these artists continue to stay where their inspiration lies and work hard to develop opportunities to exhibit in the NT and interstate. Art prizes, such as the one this exhibition launches, are a great way for artists to do this as they bring new work to the attention of large audiences, curators and interstate judges. They are also an opportunity for emerging artists to show in good company.

An exhibition such as this, which includes Indigenous artists along side non-Indigenous artists and presents familiar themes in new ways, shows clearly the diversity and strength of contemporary visual art in the Territory.