

22nd Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

12 August – 23 October 2005

As the sun set into the Arafura Sea behind a stand of giant pandanus, a huge crowd was gathering on the lawns outside the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT. On the sandy ground at the front of the stage, the *Gupapuyngu Dancers* from Elcho Island and the *Takbing Siwaliya* from Makassar, Sulawesi performed ritualised dances that spoke of centuries of contact and ceremony. On stage Mandawuy Yunupingu, spoke about 'connections', a central motif in Indigenous life and art, and one with prescient relevance to the major sponsor, Telstra. Then the winners were revealed. Accepting the major prize was the venerable Kantjupayi Benson, representing the Blackstone Tjanpi Weavers of the Western Desert, still wearing a knitted beanie despite the tropical heat.

The piece that won the 22nd *Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award* (NATSIAA) First Prize is a big work of art on every level. The *Tjanpi Grass Toyota*, an almost life sized 'toyota truck' fashioned out of soft desert grasses (*tjanpi*) and driven by a life-sized wool and grass woman, was a collaborative effort by 18 women which took over three weeks to complete. Some observers had reservations about the aesthetic merits of the winner, (consensus is always a problem given the diversity work), but the *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* was an obvious and generally popular choice. The win highlighted the collaborative nature and inherent wit of much Indigenous art and the innovation of emerging women artists who are willing to experiment boldly with new media.

Of the 369 entries received for the 2005 NATSIAA, the pre-selection panel whittled the show down to only 119 works, an almost impossible task it would seem. Interestingly this year, all the winners selected by judges Doug Hall and Destiny Deacon were women. Banduk Marika won the Bark Painting Award with *Yalangbara*, a spare work of shimmering beauty, only the artist's fourth painting on bark. Naminapu Maymuru-White won the Wandjuk Marika Three-Dimensional Memorial Award with *Milngiyawuy*, a painted log representing the Milky Way Dreaming. The General Painting Prize was awarded to Evelyn Pultara's *Yam Dreaming* and the Telstra Works on Paper Award went to Gayle Maddigan for the charcoal drawing *Remembered Ritual*.

It is hard to judge such a diverse show critically, however, as noted by others, this years' NATSIAA exhibition was perhaps not as aesthetically strong as in previous years. There were too many really large works selected for the exhibition, as if scale alone would win the award. There were a few works that stood out which did not receive awards. Foremost on the list was the luminous, monumental linocut *Sesserae* by Torres Strait Islander artist Dennis Nona, for my money, the outstanding work on paper. As for painting, Billy Benn Perrurle's *Artetyerre*, an intimate, sensitively painted horizontal landscape, as well as works by Christine Yukenbarri from Balgo and Naata Nungurrayi from the Central Desert were highlights.

There were wonderful Indigenous art exhibitions all over Darwin during NATSIA opening weekend as galleries scheduled shows to capitalise on the hoards of buyers, curators and media who were in town. Sometimes work in the satellite shows eclipsed that in the major exhibition. Beautiful work from Northern Arnhem Land could be seen in two shows at Raft Artspace, *Yakumirri* from Yirrkala and *Rarrk* from Maningrida, both of which sold out before the opening.

Despite its shortcomings the 22nd NATSIAA still presented an overall impression of the strength, vitality and diversity of contemporary Indigenous visual culture and there are no doubt some very happy women out in Blackstone, even if the \$40,000 prize money isn't quite enough for that new Toyota.

Cath Bowdler

Cath Bowdler is a Darwin based curator and writer.