



The world is listening

Tim Melville visits Darwin for its yearly celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and is captivated all over again by the powerful work coming out of Indigenous art centres.

Every August, when the weather in Darwin is balmy and sweet, the city is transformed by the Darwin Festival. The 18-day celebration of music, dance, cabaret, comedy and visual arts includes two vital fixtures on the Aboriginal art calendar: the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (the NATSIAAs), held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), and the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF) held across three days at the convention centre on the waterfront.

Presented in consultation with the Larrakia people – on whose land the convention centre stands – the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair brings together artists, arts workers, collectors, gallerists, curators and museum directors from Australia and around the world. And unlike most fairs, where the stands are occupied by individual dealer galleries, at DAAF the stands are filled by art centres located in remote Aboriginal communities.

Art centres play a critical role in contemporary Aboriginal life. Not only do they support the sharing of cultural knowledge, but they also – in the face of poverty, racism and the ‘tyranny of distance’ – generate employment and financial returns for Aboriginal artists and their families. As the editors of *Art Collector* write in the DAAF guide, “While Indigenous art can be purchased from many outlets across Australia, the best way to ensure a work has been ethically sourced is to purchase it from one of the many Indigenous-owned community-based Art Centres across Australia – or from galleries that source their artwork from these Art Centres.”

The art fair is a headrush of colour and crowds, artworks and artists, cultural performances and demonstrations. Museum-quality paintings are cheek-by-jowl with craft objects, canvases are piled on the floor, collectors queue for bubble wrap at the packing booth, the cafés do a



Above: Tim Melville with Manyjilyjarra artist Nola Campbell (of Warakurna Artists) at the 2018 Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair. Above right: Pitjantjatjara artist Fred Grant, one of the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards finalists, in front of his painting *Kupanya munu Pirilyi*, 2019, polymer paint on linen, 2000 x 2900mm. Opposite: The NATSIAA ceremony outside the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

roaring trade, and the dress code is shorts and sunglasses. DAAF is also one of Australia's most important venues for the 'business' of Aboriginal art. Everyone who is anyone attends, and Australia-wide friendships and relationships can be easily renewed with everyone in one place. For me, flying in from New Zealand, the fair is a great place to take the temperature of the Aboriginal art world and an opportunity to reconnect with the art centres whose artists I show in Auckland – Warmun, owned and governed by Gija people, and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka in northeast Arnhem Land.

The NATSIAA exhibition ran alongside DAAF, opening on the same day with an awards ceremony that filled the lawns outside MAGNT with crowds. It's a slick but family-friendly event, with lights in the trees, blankets on the grass, scampering children, live music, food trucks, beer stands, tropical warmth and always a perfect pink and orange sunset over the Timor Sea. Since 1983 the awards have recognised the best contemporary Aboriginal art produced during the previous 12 months, and 2019 saw 68 finalists chosen by Hetti Perkins (former Curator Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, AGNSW), Clothilde Bullen (Curator Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections, MCA) and Luke Scholes (Curator of Aboriginal Art, MAGNT). The prizes are sponsored by Telstra – \$50,000 for the overall winner and \$5000 each for the winners of the General Painting, 3D, Emerging, Multimedia, Bark Painting and Works on Paper categories. This year the final judging panel included Rhana Devenport (now director of the Art Gallery of South Australia) and the overall prize was awarded to senior Yolngu artist and activist Djambawa Marawili for a bark painting that he said was "written in my soul and in my blood". The audience on the grass erupted in cheers when his name was announced.

"Through your art, not just Australia but the world is listening," Luke Scholes said in his speech on the night. "We value your hard work, we acknowledge the difficulties in your lives, and we, like you, we wait. We wait for the day our nation comes to terms with what it means to be Australians. Your art shows us a way."

I was especially thrilled to see Nonggirnga Marawili of the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre – an artist whose work I show in New Zealand – win the 2019 Bark Painting award. Her painting showed the ancestral lightning strike – an electrical curse – on the estate of Baratjula and was extraordinary for its use of recycled magenta printer toner



Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning Strikes*, 2018, natural pigments and recycled print toner pigments on stringybark, 1070 x 660mm



Kaylene Whiskey, *Seven Sisters*, 2018, water-based enamel on SA tourist attraction road sign, 750 x 2700mm

alongside natural ochres. I'm visiting Buku-Larrnggay Mulka in May 2020, and hope to show some of their artists' new barks in New Zealand later in the year.

The 2019 General Painting award was won by Kaylene Whiskey, from Indulkana in South Australia, for an irreverent depiction on a metal road sign of the Seven Sisters *tjukurrpa* (dreaming). Whiskey's strong women were Wonder Woman, Cher, Whoopi Goldberg, Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, Tina Turner, Dolly Parton and Catwoman.

The doors of MAGNT were thrown open after the ceremony and we were allowed in to see the show – beautifully installed and dramatically lit. I found myself returning again and again to *Lake Baker*, a small black-and-gold work on canvas by senior Ngaanyatjarra artist Neville McArthur. I first saw Mr McArthur's work at DAAF in 2017 at the Warakurna Artists stand, then was excited to be shown more of his work the following year – it's always a thrill when you find something new to love! I especially like the way that McArthur's wobbly (yet poised) marks, and their loose gestural forms (in the most unlikely colour combinations), push my eyes around his canvases. Last year I bought several of his works to include in *Colour Field*, our May 2019 Aboriginal group show, and was pleased that one was acquired for the Chartwell Collection held on long-term loan at Auckand Art Gallery.

Neville McArthur was born in 1938 in Spinifex country, Western Australia. He was a horseman and stockman during his working life but now lives at the Wanarn Aged Care Facility, west of Alice Springs. He regularly participates in the Wanarn painting programme, which is initiated and managed by Warakurna Artists, based 80 kilometres away. Every Friday morning the Warakurna Toyota arrives packed high with canvas and paints, and Wanarn's elderly residents, many of them in palliative care, create artworks

that represent and remember their country and their cosmology. This atmosphere of creativity is beautifully evoked by anthropologist David Brooks and art historian Darren Jorgensen in their 2015 publication *Wanarn Painters of Place and Time*.

"The Wanarn paintings are accomplished with confidence and ease, over tea or television, on the verandah or in bed... The precise interpretation of the paintings coming from the Wanarn Aged Care painting programme, and their relationship to *tjukurrpa* remains obscure because they are made by people who are experiencing the end of their lives, with sensibilities far from the anxieties of life as we know it..."

Brooks and Jorgensen describe Wanarn artworks as "pushing Australia's Western Desert painting movement, well known for its dots and circles, into sparser and wobblier forms. These artists isolate and warp its motifs, to create an after-image of the Western Desert's aesthetic... The order lies in the metaphysics of the *tjukurrpa*, betrayed here by unsteady hands with an utterly intuitive grasp of the subject... Theirs is a troubling transect of the dot painting movement, where visual ideas are lost in a blur of paint or a fading of intention that nonetheless whisper in the language of the desert."

The Wanarn artists' hands may sometimes be unsteady, and the language of the desert may sometimes be faint, but the work is astonishing for its power to communicate. And as we all heard, sitting on the lawn at the awards ceremony, the world is now listening.

The next edition of DAAF and NATSIAA #37 will take place in August 2020. Tim Melville will present a new group show of Aboriginal painting in May 2020 and plans an exhibition of bark paintings from Buku-Larrnggay Mulka for August 2020.



Neville McArthur, *Lake Baker*, 2018, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 500 x 1520mm