



Connection, Dislocation, Reclamation and Innovation: The 2010 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards

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IN ITS 27TH YEAR, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAAs) inaugurated a sixth category. The New Media Award required artists to submit works reflecting the theme 'connections' with the stated aim to provide 'a national platform for indigenous artists working with new technologies and cross-disciplinary areas'.

Connections could be considered the general theme of every NATSIAA. Each year connection to country is propounded through works from remote communities, while disruptions, dislocations and reconnecting with lost or fractured cultures is commonly addressed by Indigenous artists having grown up on missions, as well as those working in the more densely settled regions outside the so-called Rowley line frontier. Amongst the ninety-six finalists of the 2010 awards there are many fine works that tackle these themes.

From amongst the forty-eight works in the General Painting Award category, Jimmy Donegan's *Papa Tjukurpa and Pukara* was the overall Telstra Award winner. His

painting boldly proclaims ancestral connections in trademark colours but with a variety of cohesive stylistic changes marking divergent pathways across the different countries of his father and grandfather in Western Australia. Elsewhere, the rich and interwoven tapestry of Indigenous connection to country was best on show with Tjungkara Ken's *Ngayuku Ngura*, a sumptuous rendering of place in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara homelands of South Australia.

Like most of this category's winners from past years, these two works were large, although not monumental. As is usual with the NATSIAAs, many finalists had scaled up for the awards and it was clear that this was handled better by some than others. Certainly the overall aesthetic impact of this year's field was less dramatic than 2009, and the quality of many of the largest works was a contributing factor. Alongside the winning painting, a multitude of iconographic elements benefited from larger compositions in the works of Tiger Palpatja, Nellie Stewart and Dickie Minyintiri. On the other hand, Katjarra Butler and Harry



Tjutjuna's works filled canvas but the potency of the depicted *tjukurpa* suffered as a result.

These examples are but a few of many, possibly impelled by an unspoken winning formula that has conflated centimetres with calibre; and the pattern was not restricted to desert painters. Sally Gabori's gestural approach has been tried and tested on large canvases; her 3.5-metre work this year dominated the entrance wall. Timothy Cook's grasp of scale worked well for his abstracted moon ceremony, whereas the expanse of black night sky dwarfed the portent of the moon story in Mabel Juli's *Garnginy Ngarranggami*.

Others resisted this trend and offered superb works in a more typical scale. Jan Billycan stood out with her soft and lyrical depiction of clan and county in a medium-scaled two-panel work titled *Kirriwirri*. Carol Mayaatja Golding and Milatjari Pumani were similarly successful in their more modestly scaled renditions. And small works can tell big stories. The six-panel work by Noongyar artist Sandra Hill vividly illustrated disconnection. Despite each canvas being 30cm square, Hill's work painted a large picture of the inherently alien practice of imposing white domestic values over Aboriginal women in the 1950s and '60s, utilising period-style imagery of seemingly benign kitchen utensils and equipment, such as a refrigerator and washing machine, superimposed over fractured Aboriginal designs.

While the dislocating effect of introduced religions on Indigenous traditions is made apparent in many works, including Danie Mellor's *A Transcendent Vision*, the importance of the church as a site for connecting with community is surprisingly revealed in a positive light by several artists. Ian Abdullah's rather surreal nocturne highlights an amusing story from his childhood growing up on the mission, while Dinni Kunothe Kemarre's *Camel Camp Church* celebrates his community in a fine example of the figurative tradition of the Utopia artists.

It is not uncommon for bark painters to work on a large scale, and although many oversized examples have been past finalists, size has been less of a motivating factor in this award category. Four of the best works in this year's



P11: Giringun Artists, *Bagu with Jiman*, ceramics, overall 165 x 410 x 90cm. Image courtesy the artists. All photographs this article by Regis Martin.

P12: 1/ Rex Milton Greeno, *Paper Bark Canoe*, paper bark, 286 x 55 x 25cm. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Dolly Dhimburra Bidingal, Nyumukuniny Bulpu, *Pandanus*, 35 x 33 x 40cm. Image courtesy the artist.

P13: 1/ Ian W. Abdulla, *This whiteman came into the church ...*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 100 x 140cm. Image courtesy the artist.

2/ Garawan Wanambi, *Marrangu*, natural pigments on bark, 145 x 59cm. Image courtesy the artist.

P14: Violet Hammer, *Canoe and Fishing implements*, screenprint on paper, 46 x 34cm. Image courtesy the artist.



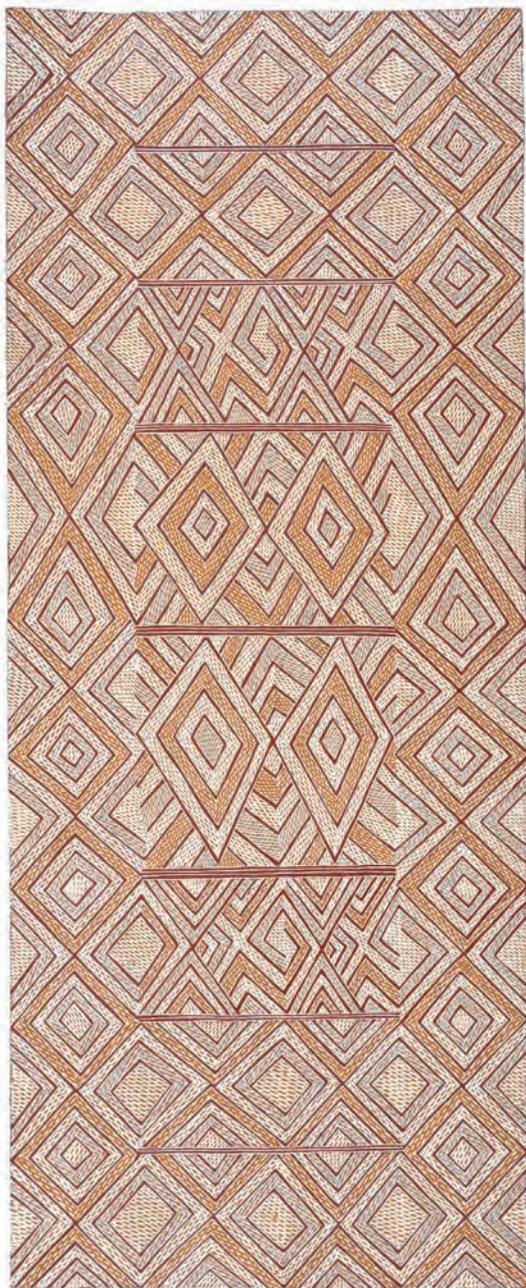
Lyn Plummer
Through the Cipher's Interval
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IMAGE: Lyn Plummer, Installation of *Constellation Haze*, 2008. Collection of the Artist





finalist field of ten are modest in scale, and were mounted alongside each other on a small wall. Together these works offered a cross-section of the medium's distinction and diversity.

Djirrirra Wunungmurra's sublime treatment of a Yirritja renewal ceremony, *Yukuwa*, references the artist's moiety and one of his names. Its fine botanical pattern painted in black on a white ground gives it the delicacy of an etching on Japanese paper; rarely does ethereal translate as well in this medium. In contrast, Glen Namundja's award-winning *Kunabibbe Ceremony at Manmoyi* offers typical Kunwinjku iconography in a superbly executed and tightly controlled composition that draws the viewer into the depths of the painting and story. Garawan Wanambi's *Marrangu* has the same effect, but the optics here works to bring forth an element of the story: a hollow log floating on water reflecting the sun's shimmer amid a pattern of clan designs.

Technical mastery and lyricism is on display in the work of the inaugural New Media Award winner, Yirrkala artist Nawurapu Wunungmurra. His mixed media installation *Mokuy* suspends five painted spirit figures carved in dancing poses just above the floor onto which archival footage of ceremonial dances is projected. This work satisfies the award's 'connections' theme with the poetry of contemporary incarnations of dancing spirits illuminated by the spirits of dancers past. The carved figures cast shadows on the film that appear to resemble crocodiles; the film shows hunting dances. And the installation-enclosure itself adds a subtle and surprising dimension. The freely suspended figures rotate slowly according to changes in air pressure. I witnessed the spirits turn their backs to the entrance when the room emptied, and then turn to face those who ventured into the space, as if eager to communicate their culture.

The Yirrkala community is also producing *mokuy* figures in bronze. This convergence of adaptation and ancestry is apparent elsewhere in the exhibition, such as in the three-dimensional work by sixteen Giringun artists, *Bagu with Jiman*, where firemakers formerly made of milky pine-wood are reinterpreted as clay figurines referencing spirits.

The *Mokuy* installation is the most sophisticated of the entries in the New Media category. Aroha Groves's computer generated interactive visualisation, *Connections2*, which the artist describes as being 'post convergent' art, earned a Highly Commended. The video screen presented an image of a butterfly, which occasionally beat its wings, against a flickering patterned background. Tellingly, only one group of young children was witnessed interacting with this work; over the course of multiple visits it remained largely static, its message aloof.

The remaining five entrants in this category were digital images including two photographic portraits: a work from the highly successful *Sistagirls* series by Victorian Bindi Cole, and a young Aboriginal male by local Larrakia artist Gary Lee. Reko Rennie's subverted billposters attacked assumptions about nationality and also addressed reclamation, in this case the cultural symbols of the Southern Cross and the Australian coat of arms.

In previous NATSIAAs photographs featured in the Works on Paper category. Without the theatre and power of the winner (*Mokuy*) and the reliability of the photographic entrants, the New Media field would have been weak. Compared to the glamour of acquisition by the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art and the pull of a \$75,000 prize for its National New Media Art Award, Telstra's newest award category may hold less appeal for avant-garde practitioners whose production costs are often high.

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In the Works On Paper category, the import of Violet Hammer's small black-and-white etching depicting traditional canoe and fishing implements belied its scale and iconography. The work's design was simple and strong, as was its message: a pointed reminder of the continuance of cultural traditions. The etching unintentionally references the vast body of colonial ethnographic records in this medium. In light of the recent native title win at Blue Mud Bay in Yolngu country,¹ this small, unassuming work by a Gulf of Carpentaria artist carried *gravitas*.

It seems that the drive for breadth of representation outweighed consideration of calibre particularly for the Works On Paper category. The technical expertise and beauty of Denis Nona's etching of migrating turtles made him a convincing and clear winner in this category.

The three-dimensional works amongst a large field of twenty-one this year were particularly engaging, but it was the subtlety of the winning work that won over the judges. *Bamurrungu* by Wukun Wanambi is a hollow log profusely decorated with swirls of tiny fish in currents leading to a large natural swelling in the selected pole, which references a sacred rock in the artist's country; the overall whiteness of the painted log echoes the wash of turbulent waters against the rock, the bubbles of which represent life force and a direct ancestral connection to the artist's clan, the Yolngu speaking Marrakulu.

More dramatic finalists included Zugub Alick Tipoti's massive work, *Kazilayg*, a pregnant dugong in fiberglass, and Clara Nganjmirra's giant and somewhat scary *Yawk Yawk* made from pandanus and recycled materials; both good examples of strong technical entrants that had the added attraction of drawing in gaping crowds, as did Lena Yarinkura's *Spider and Spider Web*, which was ranked as Highly Commended.

Those willing to look beyond the spectacle of the large-scaled works were rewarded with finely executed small, woven gems, such as Dolly Dhimburra Bidingal's group of tiny baskets, *Nyumukuniny Bulpu*. In conception and installation, clustered and with handles hidden against the wall, they

resembled a posy, evoking images of the bush food that children collect in these very same *bulpu*. Merrill Girrabul's *Star Handbag* is a highly decorative object that blends a revival of a past form, albeit mission influenced, with innovation in technique, using a novel form of knotting pandanus.

Disconnection was strongly voiced by artists from eastern states throughout the categories. In the Wandjuk Marika Memorial 3D Award, Joanne Currie Nalingu's highly commended *Blood River (Senseless)* and Ian Waldron's *Language learned, culture regained* enunciate both loss and hope. Currie laments her loss of culture and life disturbances, pointedly stated in plaques suspended from black and red resin shields carved with designs from the Maranoa River region where she was mission raised; while Waldron's mixed media work aims to memorialise the importance of language for the continuance of culture.

Rex Milton Greeno's complex and beautifully constructed Paper Bark Canoe is a fascinating example of a re-imaged artefact from a lost Tasmanian cultural tradition; it is understood the artist based his work on an 1840s model and extant colonial documentation. Calibre of the work notwithstanding, the importance of Indigenous reconnection/reclamation discourses in influencing public institution acquisition policy was made apparent through its acquisition by the Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory. The work specifically references the practice of cultural renewal by a people located at the other end of the continent.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the directions evolving in the NATSIAAs. In some ways Greeno's canoe symbolises the artistic journeys of many working in the long settled states of Australia, whose culture and traditions have suffered dramatic disruption and dislocation, and whose works focus on reclamation. The assumption that artistic innovation is the sole preserve of these artists, however, is now being challenged by others from more remote communities. This year's winner of the New Media category is a case in point and speaks of the possibility that this divergence in geography and practice will become less obvious over time. Tracking these cultural and artistic journeys, the NATSIAAs annual forum earns it pride of place in the Indigenous art calendar. ❀

1. Blue Mud Bay in north-east Arnhem Land (and joining the Gulf of Carpentaria) is the area over which the High Court ruled in July this year to uphold the traditional owners' exclusive rights over tidal waters.

The 27th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards is showing at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT until 7 November. See Artnotes NT (page 58) for an image of Jimmy Donegan's *Papa Tjukurpa, Pukara*, the Awards' overall winner and winner of the General Painting category.

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