

Art at the top

It's dry season and this month's Darwin Festival is just one of the cultural attractions in town.

WORDS JANE RAFFAN



WE UNFOLD PHOTOGRAPHY: JEFF BUSBY

A WASH WITH HEAVY monsoon rains for months on end, the Top End's wet season keeps its inhabitants largely indoors. With the emergence of the Dry (April to October), sub-equatorial Darwin bursts into life, serving as a theatrical backdrop to drama both natural and man-made.

The city's natural stage sets range from primeval – replete with things that squeak, squawk and slither around in the inky black – to a tropical paradise with floral scents and aromas of Asia adrift in the air. Australia's northernmost city also offers a wide cross-section of cultural and artistic stimuli during the Dry. Where else would the opportunity arise to see classical ballet accompanied by didgeridoo?

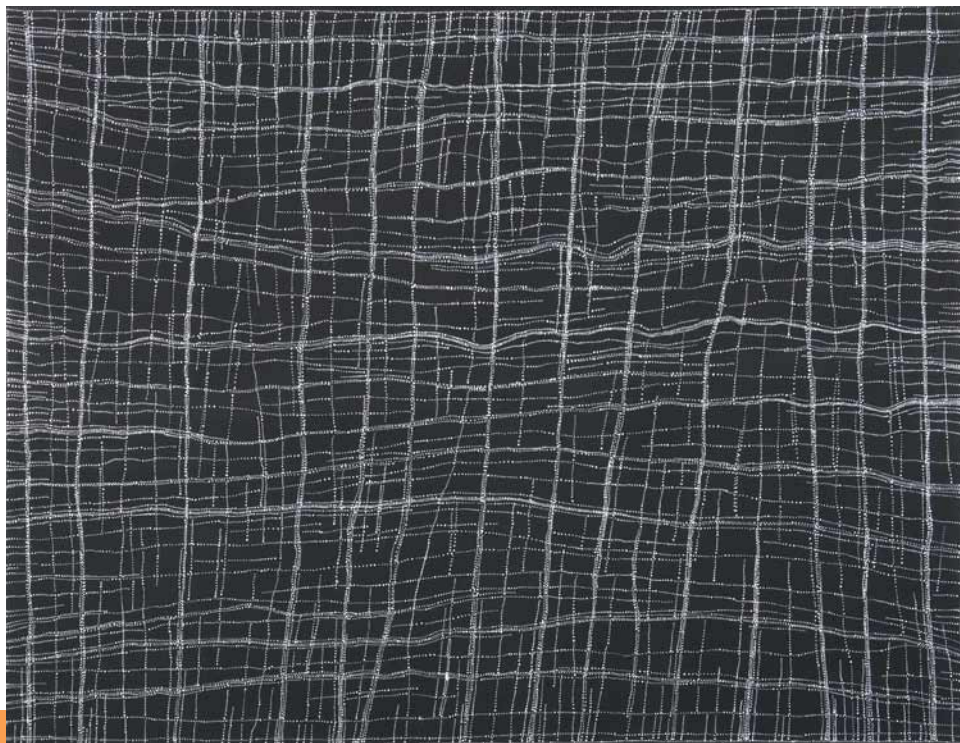
Foremost among these attractions is the Darwin Festival (August 11-28, darwinfestival.org.au), which features an eclectic line-up encompassing circus acrobats, massed choirs, an Indigenous take on *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* and a performance artist running 42km on a treadmill in a homage to the battle of Marathon.

According to artistic director Jo Duffy, the festival is a reflection of the Territory's creativity. "Credit for that goes to the artists who call this fertile environment their home, be that for a few years or a lifetime. They may come and go, or collaborate with others across the region or the world, but their work is inextricably linked to this landscape".

The origins of the Darwin Festival can be traced to the 1978 Bougainvillea Festival, which emerged following the carnage of Cyclone Tracy as a means of celebrating Darwin's revival. With the expansion of the country's mining industry over the past decade, particularly Timor Sea gas and oil ventures, Darwin has benefited from an economic, infrastructure and real estate boom. The festival has since adopted the name of its host city and become a major draw-card, attracting close to 100,000 people.

One of the key strengths of the festival is Darwin's cultural and artistic heritage, a melange of cultures from the Top End and Torres Strait as well as East Timor and other parts of Asia. "The festival works with artists who are redefining tradition to keep Asian culture alive and vital, such as Li & Sa, a Korean collective who combine traditional Korean music played on original instruments with video and still projections reinterpreting images of Buddhist culture," says Duffy. >

Civic Park heats up for the Darwin Festival; Sydney Dance Company, *We Unfold* (inset)



“We also work with South-East Asian artists and communities who’ve made Darwin home. Their voice is strong in Top End culture, influencing everything from art and fashion to food and lifestyle.”

Indigenous acts are an important element and this year the festival will host the inaugural National Indigenous Music Awards. ARIA Male Artist of the Year Dan Sultan will headline, with performances also from Warumpi Band, Coloured Stone and No Fixed Address.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE *Cantina*, a circus set in a seedy underworld where acrobatics signify magic and animal passion; the Sydney Dance Company’s avant-garde production of *We Unfold* by Rafael Bonachela; and Opera Australia’s vibrant production of Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Music and comedy lovers will also be looked after with performances from Jessica Mauboy, Ed Kuepper, Casey Donovan, Little Red, Clare Bowditch, Arj Barker, Meow Meow and the Sistagirls.

The festival’s profile has grown in tandem with that of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, or NATSIAA (Museum & Art Gallery of the NT, August 11-October 30, nt.gov.au/natsiaa). Originating in 1984, the award has become the country’s most important commercial exhibition of Indigenous art – and a valuable indicator of rising talent. Past winners include some of the biggest names in the art market such as Makinti Napanangka from Kintore, Dorothy Napangardi from Mina Mina, and Dennis Nona from Badu Island in the Torres Strait.

One prominent gallery near the city centre, the Cross Cultural Art Exchange (www.ccae.com.au), is planning to hold exhibitions with northern neighbours Papua New Guinea and East Timor.

Says CCAE director Paul Johnstone: “With relatively little distance between us and great cultural wealth to share, [these countries] present enormous potential for artistic exchange.”



**Pandanus basket
from Mardbalk
Arts & Craft**

Dan Sultan (above left); Dorothy Napangardi, *Salt On Mina Mina*

The Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (Darwin Convention Centre, August 12-14, darwinaboriginalartfair.com.au) showcases artistic development from some 40 art centres in the Top End, Kimberley and Central Desert regions, as well as Victoria and Queensland. Offering works by emerging artists as well as established names such as Mabel Juli from Warmun in the Kimberley, the art fair has works to suit every budget, from a few hundred dollars to about \$10,000.

As one of Australia’s premier Indigenous art awards, NATSIAA has seen its share of controversy. In 2003 Richard Bell won the major prize for a painting emblazoned with the words “Aboriginal Art – It’s A White Thing”, and went on to state that “Aboriginal art has become a product of the times... There is no Aboriginal art industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal art.”

Those looking for a unique experience further afield might consider the Garma Festival (Gulkula, August 5-11, yf.com.au), a more remote event arranged by the Yothu Yindi Foundation. Yolngu clans gather east of Darwin in the Gove Peninsula to celebrate and share East Arnhem Land culture with the public in performance, workshops and community forums. Getting there can be somewhat tricky, but visitors – usually a mix of seasoned collectors, academics, anthropologists and adventurers – are richly rewarded.

The Northern Territory government is also keen to promote non-Indigenous arts and has injected funding into a public art and heritage program. The Togart Contemporary Art Award (togartaward.com.au) is open to current and previous Territory artists as well as those whose work demonstrates a strong connection with the Territory’s surrounds. The resulting exhibition at Chan Contemporary Art Space, September 8-October 16, promises to be a fitting closing act on Darwin’s cultural stage during the Dry. 🌐