



## **PR and POLITICS**

### **The 2009 TELSTRA ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ART AWARDS**

#### THE POWER of PR

The fanfare is over and the red carpet has been rolled away for another year. The winners of the 2009 Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards are now well known, and are riding the national press train gathering status and celebrity at each stop.

What does the 2009 event tell of the wins and losses for the industry, as opposed to the individual category winners? The award finalists showcase a plethora of talent in a multi-media exhibition of nearly 100 works of art, but what implications can be gleaned from the make-up of the final cut?

As with the nominations for the Academy Awards, making the final selection at the Telstra Art Awards can launch the careers of fledgling artists, flourishing them with the first recognition of a career with promise. With regular, and in some cases continuous yearly representation thereafter, albeit sometimes in different categories, nominations assure a growth in profile, status and earnings.

And like the Academy Awards, PR and politics play their roles in the Telstra Art Awards to significant effect, up front and behind the scenes. Due to the advanced age of many of the desert artists, the nod of inclusion can make, or potentially fracture, what might be a relatively short career and severely impact earnings potential.

One finalist this year is Mitjili Napanangka Gibson, a senior tribal elder and artist, who is the aunt of another Telstra Art Awards winner and star painter, Dorothy Napangardi. Mitjili rose to notice in 2006 and her richly textured paintings were snapped up at Gallery Gondwana exhibitions countrywide. The Telstra Art Awards' press has pointedly noted Mitjili's performance in this year's Cannes Camera d'Or prize winning film '*Samson and Delilah*', and this will no doubt help elevate her profile in a market that can be oft described as having an attention deficit disorder; always in search of the next rising star. It also adds cache and celebrity to the Awards themselves, and greatly assists the pre-announcement PR endeavour, which, after 25 years, struggles to earn interesting pre-awards press attention.

It came as no surprise that the deserving recipient of this year's major prize, Queensland artist Danie Mellor, described his win as better than getting an Oscar. And while Mitjili Napanangka Gibson did not win any of the major awards, her work was acquired by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory; the only desert-based work amongst the acquisitions, alongside two fibre-based works of art, a bark and work on paper.

#### PAINTING POLITICS and PLAYING POLITICS

Mellor's win is an important step forward in the recognition of indigenous contemporary art practise at the Telstra Art Awards, and for the market in works that examine recent histories and experiences of indigenous peoples, which has tended to be overshadowed by more traditional exponents of ceremonial designs and narratives connecting culture to country, and also overlooked by a majority of buyers.

It also sends a strong signal that politics is pre-eminent in post-colonial examinations of history and explorations of contemporary culture. Nearly 10% of this year's finalists concentrated on histories of post-colonial impact: narratives of mission life and the effects of Christianity on culture; stockmen stories; and personal accounts of aspects of contemporary daily life, from football games (AFL, of course) to one artist's memorable experience of catching a ride on a truck from Alice Springs to Utopia.

The best of these stories were executed on a small scale, as the intimate nature of the stories was amplified by one being drawn close to the works: Irwin Lewis and Pauline Moran's respective works entitled *Mission Times*; and the delightful 3D work by Tjanpi Desert weaver Iwana Ken of two camels, which alerts us to the impact and racial mix of the Afghan cameleers who first arrived with explores in the 1830s and who, in the latter part of the century, worked for the overland telegraph line and for the South Australian railway line, later known as the Ghan. To some, first contact stories have become modern *Tjukurrpa* or dreaming, as witnessed by the first encounter depiction of the Lasseter's gold exploration story by the Warakurna Artist's Women's Collaborative.

The winning 3D work by Janine McAullay Bott, a woven fibre figure of a bilby, was both well devised and had a story to tell about the importance of connecting to culture and ancestors. This theme was explored by many of the urban-based artists, as well as those in remote communities, where we have come to expect this connection to be expressed through country. Nici Cumpston's impressive painting solemnly depicts the damage done to a section of the Murray River, but it is also a surprising celebration of ancestry, as the denuded trees raised by receding waters revealed Aboriginal boundary markings from times past. The inclusion of the works by Bolt and Lewis are strong statements about reclaiming culture. Aside from the stories inherent in the actual works, both artists connect with the Noongar people of south western WA,

whose artistic culture has undergone a resurgence following the relatively recent rediscovery of a body of work produced by mission children from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now known as the Carrolup Style.

This year's Awards could be posited as celebrating the politics of history, but what of the politics of commerce? In 2008 seven art centres withdrew preselected works of art from the Telstra Art Awards, reportedly coordinated by Desert in protest against the inclusion of works by artists from a particular gallery source.<sup>1</sup> While it is unlikely that the exclusion of their works caused any direct harm to the artists' careers, being excluded from the selling exhibition, and obviously from being in the running for an award, would have potentially impacted on their potential remuneration in the short term.

The 2009 Awards witnessed claims of this problem at work with regards to Tommy Watson and three other artists, made public by the very person at the centre of the 2008 furore. Tommy Watson previously carried star cache for the awards; this year he didn't make the cut. Like Mitjili Napanangka Gibson, Tommy Watson is also elderly, and his exclusion may yet prove to have an impact on the market for his work.

The Telstra Art Awards are open to any indigenous adult artist, and individuals represented a small percentage of the make-up of this year's finalists, which saw art centres from the Top End weigh in with around 36%, and desert art centres around 28%. Of these, Papunya Tula dominated, both in the scale of the works that made the short list, and the quantity, at around 8%. Newer centres, such as Tjala Arts and Tjungu Palya, continued their strong showing, capturing between them 7% of the finalist slots, eclipsing Balgo and Mankaja Arts for colour. It is notable that artists represented by commercial galleries, rather than art centres, accounted for nearly 30% of finalists; an impressive contribution, and one that would seem to dampen the idea that the centres were somehow holding sway over the Awards.

Past winner Denis Nona again made the final selection with an interesting 3D work referencing the trade in skulls between the Torres Strait and Papua New Guinea, while Tiwi Design had three large scale works by Jean Baptiste Apuatimi, Maria Josette Orsto and Margaret Renee Kerinauia. The Awards were also notable for absences: there was a dearth of Kimberley ochre, with only one work from Warmun Art Centre by Lena Nyadbi. As if to disguise the shortfall in representation, the curators installed the painting close to three acrylic works by WA artists Bill Yidumduma Harney, Omborrin and Peggy Wassi, which were all painted in subdued ochre palettes.

Papunya Tula artist Yinarupa Nangala took out the General Painting award for her sublime untitled work depicting designs associated with a culturally significant rock hole site, and the centre also achieved a highly commended for a previous Telstra Art Award winner, Doreen Nakamarra Reid. The Top End secured the remaining two awards: Rerrkirrwanga Munungurr, from Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, for a finely worked bark painting depicting sacred fire clan designs; and Glen Namundja, from Injalak Arts, for an intricate and complex Yawkyaw design on paper.

The selection process for the Awards is restricted to the panel of experts, now numbering five, and the public is not able to judge the calibre of excluded works. While this is normal procedure in most art prizes, in light of Tommy Watson's acclaimed talent, it does lend intrigue, although not credence, to the comments made by Watson's dealer representative, John Ioannou, who claims that the exclusion of the four artists was fallout from last year's furore.<sup>2</sup>

Desart wishes to see the selection process subject to entrants complying with, and being judged against, a commercial Code of Conduct for the Indigenous Art Industry.<sup>3</sup> The 2008 stand by Desart and the centres aimed to move the issue from debate to development. The merits of the ongoing dispute are being addressed elsewhere, and it is clear that a Code of Conduct for the indigenous art industry, which is now in development, is both worthwhile and overdue. It remains unclear, however, whether Telstra will make compliance with the Code a condition of entry, but whatever the outcome, it is unlikely that Telstra would welcome any continued discord associated with the Awards, especially since it has described its role as key to "driving the flourishing art industry".<sup>4</sup>

Tommy Watson's secondary market results, however, have been stellar, with sales clearing around 80% and works averaging \$50,000, while Mitjili Napanangka Gibson's works are still in the tight grip of collectors, commercial galleries and institutions. It will be interesting to see how the market for these stars, and those of the newly endowed winners and finalists, perform over the coming year. In the interim, it remains to be seen whether the Telstra Art Awards are driving, or in fact reshaping, the indigenous art industry, but there is no doubt that both artists and the art market are well served by continued support in this format.

### **THIRD ABORIGINAL ART FAIR, DARWIN**

The Telstra Art Awards aim to showcase the best works from indigenous artists Australia wide and works are priced, in general, for serious collectors. In contrast, what expectations should we have for the third Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair? Last year exhibitors were criticised for approaching the event as a clearing house for lower-priced works. This year the number of participants has almost doubled from the 2007/08 tally of 19 to 33 centres, and while there were clearly works priced to attract entry level collectors and tourists in town for the month-long festival, there were also notable exceptions in both strategy and display.

Tiwi Design chose to highlight a select few of their premier painters, including Jean Baptist Apuatimi and Maria Josette Orsto, and PR rather than direct sales was the strategy in this instance. It is notable, however, that the Tiwi Art Network had staged a concurrent exhibition of some 100 works at the Entertainment Centre that was selling very well and drew in crowds. The Kimberley centres showed a range of small to medium scaled work: Warmun Art Centre sold well on the first day, with a sea of red dots apparent in stark contrast to most other booths, and by day 3 had almost sold out. Along with a diverse offering from their stable of artists, Warmun also used the event to train indigenous workers in sales administration, who were to take up these roles at the centre.

Warlayirti Artists was the only centre to feature a group of works by a single artist: Lucy Loomoo Nungurrayi on day 1, Nora Wompi Nungurrayi on day 2, and Elizabeth Nyumi Nungurrayi on day 3, which gave the booth an air of gravitas and stateliness compared with the small clusters of colourful gems on offer in other desert booths. Papunya Tula also changed their display daily, although they were exhibiting a greater number of small works by a range of artists, and didn't bother with red dots; and Warlukurlangu Artists was feverishly busy every day, with a rotation of large works by Shorty Jangala Robertson and Judy Napangardi Watson competing for wall space with smaller works.

It was refreshing to see representation of works by some of the less well known cultures, such as the Noongar from south western WA and East Gippsland artists from Victoria; and Tjanpi Desert Weavers provided a lively, diverse and highly affordable offering, which attracted attention and turnover. The increase in participants has ensured heavy foot traffic, and the space was at times difficult to navigate. One centre representative from WA was overheard lamenting that people were simply too busy to be able to commit to buying, but this wasn't the experience at large. In general, the quality of the work was strong, weakest in the smallest desert canvases priced at the lowest end of the market. This seems to be in accord with Desert's statement that art centres were retreating to quality in the face of the global financial crisis.<sup>5</sup> Further refinement in staging and strategy will assist the long term success of the fair, but the 2010 event should still be on all serious indigenous art collectors' calendars.

JANE RAFFAN

16 August 2009

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ashleigh Wilson, "Awards invite reinvention", The Australian, 29 September 2008

<sup>2</sup> Ashleigh Wilson, "Rumours got my artists rejected: dealer", The Australian, 30 July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Browning, "The 25<sup>th</sup> Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award", *Away!*, ABC Radio National, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/away/stories/2008/2338806.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Georgia Symmons, General Manager of Telstra's Indigenous Directorate, "Desert Artists Feature in Telstra Art Award", NT Government Media Release, Monday 27 July 2009, available at <http://www.artshub.com.au/au/newsPrint.asp?sId=178745>

<sup>5</sup> John Oster, quoted in "Aboriginal art flourishes despite recession", The West Australian, 12 August 2009.

#### IMAGE

IWANA KEN

*Kamula Kutjara Saddlajarra* (Two Camels with Saddles), 2009

wire, hand-spun wool, raffia, minarri (greybeard grass), synthetic yarn, buttons

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